

Early onset neonatal sepsis

This leaflet offers more information about suspected early onset neonatal sepsis. If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your care.

What is early onset neonatal sepsis and why is there a risk that my child has got it?

Sepsis is a rare but serious complication of an infection.

Newborn babies are more at risk of infections because their immune system is still developing and is less able to fight them off.

There may also be a risk of blood infection from problems in pregnancy or labour, such as:

- waters breaking more than 24 hours before labour
- an infection in the mother during or before labour such as a urinary tract infection (UTI) or a womb infection (chorioamnionitis)
- bacteria in the birth canal such as Group B Streptococcus (GBS)
- premature birth (born before 37 weeks).

What are the signs and symptoms of a neonatal infection?

- Breathing difficulties
- Low blood sugar levels
- Jaundice (yellow/orange coloured skin)
- Abnormal temperature; too cold or too hot.

Your midwife will look for these signs and check other risks during labour and will assess your baby after birth.

If we are concerned that your baby is at risk or showing signs of sepsis, a paediatrician will also assess your baby.

What needs to be done if my baby is at risk or shows signs of an infection?

The paediatrician will carefully review the history of your pregnancy and labour with your midwife and will examine your baby looking for signs of infection.

They may ask for your baby to be brought for assessment to the neonatal unit which has specialist monitoring equipment. This does not necessarily mean your baby is more unwell.

Depending on how high we think the risk of infection is your baby may need to be observed regularly by a midwife for the first 24 hours of life, or they may need further investigations including blood tests.

If blood tests are done, antibiotics will usually be started while we wait for the results.

What are the risks of antibiotic treatment?

We recommend a once daily antibiotic called Ceftriaxone to treat newborn babies who are well but have risk factors for infection, and for babies with some signs of infection who are well enough to stay on the postnatal ward.

Ceftriaxone is considered very safe for newborn babies, even when mothers have an allergy to antibiotics including penicillin. It does not tend to cause any short or long term side effects in newborn babies and will not affect their immune system or ability to fight infections naturally.

Ceftriaxone does kill a wide range of both 'good' and 'bad' bacteria, so is only used for as short a time as possible. You can help your baby's 'good' bacteria by breastfeeding during and after the antibiotic treatment. Supermarket or over-the-counter pro-biotic products should not be given.

Your baby will be given the antibiotic through a thin plastic tube called a cannula placed into a vein, as newborn babies do not absorb antibiotics given by mouth well. This is a routine procedure usually done in the neonatal unit and you can be with your baby while it is done. It may cause your baby a small amount of pain or discomfort. Once in place, the cannula will be secured with a clear plastic dressing and should cause no further pain.

What could happen if my baby does not get treatment?

Not all babies at risk of infection will actually have an infection. Some of the signs may be from the baby adapting to life outside the womb, but without tests and a period of observation it is hard to tell if your baby has an infection or not.

If your baby does have an infection, early treatment will often mean there are no long term effects.

Untreated infections can become much harder to treat by the time there are definite signs, and babies can come to long term harm and need treatment for longer.

The course of action we set out in this leaflet is in line with national and international recommendations on the treatment of suspected neonatal infection.

What will happen after antibiotics are started?

In most cases your baby will stay with you on the postnatal ward. The midwife will observe them regularly and take measurements of their heart rate, breathing and temperature.

During the first day the neonatal medical team will look at the blood test results to check if they suggest an infection.

Your baby will have a second dose of the antibiotic at 24 hours old. A repeat blood test (called CRP) will also be taken to look for any changes. This is important as in some babies the first test may not show an infection because of a delay in your baby's body's response to the infection.

If the blood tests and signs suggest a definite infection, further tests may be needed. Your baby will also need more than the two doses of antibiotics described above. The neonatal team will discuss this in detail with you.

If none of the blood tests and observations suggest your baby has an infection, they will be discharged home.

The neonatal medical team will then review the results of a blood culture test which will be ready after 36 hours. In most cases the test will be negative and you and your GP will receive a letter to confirm this.

It is unusual for this test to show signs of bacteria in your baby's bloodstream, but this can happen, even though other tests are negative. If this happens we will contact you and you may need to come back to be re-admitted for your baby to have three – five more days of antibiotics.

What should I do once I go home?

Once discharged, your baby should be treated the same as any other baby.

However, if tests done during your pregnancy show you carry Group B Streptococcus (GBS) bacteria, there is still a small risk of the baby developing a late infection, even if they had antibiotics straight after birth. This is possible up to six weeks after birth.

Signs of infection in newborn babies can be hard to spot, but include

- changes in behaviour such as inconsolable crying
- your baby being listless or unusually floppy
- your baby having problems feeding or tolerating feeds
- your baby being unusually cold or hot even if the environment is not
- rapid breathing
- change in skin colour – including being pale or developing jaundice (yellow coloured skin).

You should carry on monitoring your baby at home for any of these signs and if you spot any, contact your midwife, GP or go to the emergency department (ED) in an emergency.

Your GP will receive a letter explaining why your baby needed antibiotics. Please remember to register your baby with your GP practice as soon as possible.

Useful sources of information

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby

The NHS choices website contains useful information about many aspects of pregnancy and looking after a newborn baby. Use your smartphone to scan the QR code (you may need to download a QR code scanning app) to go directly to the newborn infections page.



NICE

www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg149/ifp/chapter/About-this-information

NICE give detailed information about the neonatal early onset infection national guidelines on which our policy is based.



Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about neonatal infections, please contact a member of the neonatal medical team on Gwillim ward.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

