

# IDRS Infectious Disease Reporting System

Disease Reporting 24 Hours a Day

Columbus Public Health and Franklin County Public Health

## STREPTOCOCCAL B - DISEASE OF THE NEWBORN

Group B *Streptococcus* (GBS) is a bacterium that causes illness in newborn babies, pregnant women, the elderly, and adults with other illnesses, such as diabetes or liver disease. GBS is the most common cause of life-threatening infections in newborns.

### Symptoms

GBS of the newborn occurs in two forms:

- Early onset disease starts before the baby is 7 days old—usually within hours of birth.
  - This form is much more common
  - It may cause sepsis (blood infection), pneumonia, or meningitis (infection in the brain).
- Late onset disease begins between 7 days to 3 months of age
  - This causes sepsis or meningitis, or (less frequently) bone and joint infections.
- Symptoms of either type include fever, difficulty feeding, irritability, or a baby that is limp and hard to wake up. If you think your newborn is sick, get medical help right away.

### Transmission

- Many people carry GBS in their bodies but do not become ill. These people are considered to be “carriers.” A fetus may come in contact with GBS before or during birth if the mother carries GBS in the rectum or vagina. People who carry GBS do not always have it all their lives—the bacteria may come and go.
- Premature babies are more susceptible to GBS infection than full-term babies.
- Late onset GBS is probably acquired through human-to-human contact. Only about half of late onset GBS disease among newborns comes from a mother who is a GBS carrier.

### Treatment

- GBS disease is diagnosed when the bacterium is grown from cultures of sterile body fluids, such as blood or spinal fluid. Cultures take a few days to complete.
- GBS infections in both newborns and adults are usually treated with antibiotics (e.g. penicillin or ampicillin) given through a vein.

### Prevention

- Pregnant women can be checked for GBS by vaginal and rectal swabs taken near the time of delivery (approx 37 weeks gestation). A positive result means that she carries GBS, not that she or her baby will definitely become ill.
- If GBS are detected in a pregnant woman and she has risk factors including fever, membrane rupture 18 hours or more before delivery, or has premature labor before 37 weeks gestation, then intravenous antibiotics administered during labor can help prevent infection in the newborn. Antibiotics for GBS carriers who do not have these risk factors are optional.
- The government is supporting research on a vaccine for group B strep disease.

All information is general in nature and is not intended to be used as a substitute for appropriate professional advice.



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