What is Haemolytic Group B Streptococcus (GBS)?

GBS is a bacterium that lives in the vagina and rectum of 10-30% of Australian women. It is not a sexually transmitted disease. It usually causes no symptoms and is not harmful to the mother. If it is passed from the mother to her baby around the time of birth, it can occasionally cause a serious illness for the newborn baby.

What does this mean for my baby?

Many babies will come in contact with GBS during labour and birth and a small number of babies will become infected with GBS. Approximately 1% of babies exposed with GBS at birth will develop an infection. GBS infection is therefore rare. Of the babies who develop an infection a very small number will develop pneumonia or meningitis which can be life threatening. The majority of babies are not harmed by contact with GBS at birth.

Is there a test to see if my baby is at risk of GBS infection?

At the RHW, all women are offered a vaginal swab at 36 weeks gestation. Your caregiver will explain to you how you can collect the swab yourself.

How can my baby be protected from developing an infection?

If you have tested positive to GBS at any time during this pregnancy you are offered antibiotics by injection into a vein, in labour, to prevent infection. The usual antibiotic is penicillin, with erythromycin given to women who have an allergy to penicillin.

There are also other circumstances in which women are offered antibiotics:

- if you have GBS on a urine test
- if you have had a previous baby infected with GBS
- if you have a fever in labour
- if there has been no swab and you have ruptured membranes for more than 18 hours
- if you labour before 37 weeks gestation.

Are there risks with having antibiotics?

Some women will experience side effects such as nausea or diarrhoea. Rarely, an allergic reaction may occur. For most women antibiotics are safe.

Do the antibiotics guarantee that my baby will not develop an infection?

No treatment is perfect. Some women will be given antibiotics and their baby will still develop an infection. Screening and treatment does, however, decrease the small risk of infection.

Do I need antibiotics if I am having an elective Caesarean Section?

Yes, but for different reasons that will be explained to you at the time of caesarean.

Can I give birth in the Birth Centre if I have GBS on a swab?

Yes.

What do I do if my swab shows GBS, my waters break and I do not go into labour?

Prolonged rupture of the membranes increases the risk of infection. You will therefore be offered induction of labour within 24 hours.

If I have GBS on a swab, does my baby have extra monitoring after delivery?

If you have had a positive swab for GBS or a high temperature in labour, the midwives will monitor your baby closely on the postnatal ward for 48 hours. If you choose to go home earlier than this you need to discuss this with a paediatrician prior to discharge.

What are the signs of a baby with an infection?

Some of the physical signs of an infection could include: high temperature and difficulty or fast breathing. If you notice this in your baby please alert your midwife or doctor.