

What is Group B Strep?

Group B streptococcus is the leading cause of neonatal infection in the United States. GBS is just one of the many types of bacteria that can be present on the human body. Approximately 20 – 30% of the population are asymptomatic carriers. That is, Group B Strep is a normal part of their healthy skin bacteria. Infants can acquire the infection by passing through the birth canal.

The risk of infection to a newborn delivered from an asymptomatic carrier is estimated to be 1/100 live births and is thus relatively rare. The dilemma becomes how to predict which babies will get infected. The most accurate way to diagnose GBS is to perform a culture. Unfortunately cultures take up to 48 hours for final results and are not much help to the women in labor, a test that could give immediate and accurate results and be performed on women while she is in labor would be ideal, however no such test exists at this point in time.

To compensate for shortcomings in available tests, doctors have developed lists of risk factors that will predict an increased chance of neonatal infection. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) have developed such a list which includes:

- (1) labor occurring before 37 weeks
- (2) rupture of membranes before 37 weeks
- (3) prolonged (longer than 18 hours) rupture of membranes
- (4) previous child affected by GBS infection
- (5) maternal fever in labor
- (6) urine culture that grows GBS
- (7) culture obtained by a swab being placed in the vagina and the rectum between 35 and 36 weeks that grows GBS

If you have been identified as a carrier of GBS or you have any of these risk factors, you will be treated with antibiotics in labor.

By utilizing the above list of risk factors and screening cultures at 35 to 36 weeks of gestation, your doctor can do a reasonable job at predicting which newborn infants are at risk of developing a GBS infection. In such cases initiating antibiotic therapy during labor will dramatically decrease the possibility of your newborn encountering a potentially serious infection.