

# Infection

## What kinds of infections are common in babies?

Babies can easily get many kinds of infections. Generalized infection or infection of the blood stream is referred to as sepsis; infection of the lungs, pneumonia; infection of the fluid that surrounds the brain, meningitis; infection of the urine, urinary tract infection or UTI. Babies can also get localized infections under the skin called abscesses or infections of the skin.

Infections in babies can be caused by bacteria (most common), viruses, or fungi. Infections can be present before birth, acquired near the time of birth, or acquired while the baby is in the nursery.

## Why do premature babies get infections so easily?

- Babies have an immature immune system. They have not had time to build up their own antibodies to fight infection.
- Premie babies get fewer antibodies from their mothers since most antibodies are transferred across the placenta to the baby in the last few months of pregnancy.
- Premie babies often have intravenous catheters. These may serve as a route of entry for bacteria.
- Premie babies frequently are given antibiotics for infections. These kill the bacteria most likely to cause infection, but enable other less common germs to grow more easily.

## How does a baby with an infection act?

Signs of infection are non-specific; babies may act the same no matter what is wrong with them. These may include any or all of the following:

- less active or less alert
- more apnea (stops breathing)
- new or increased breathing problems
- difficulty keeping his/her body temperature normal
- poor tolerance to feedings
- poor skin color
- problems with low blood pressure
- seizures/convulsions (meningitis only)

## How will my baby's doctors know if there is an infection?

Your baby's doctor may:

- Obtain fluid samples from one or more body sites (blood, urine, spinal fluid) to send to the laboratory for culture. The laboratory will see if bacteria grow from this fluid.
- Measure the number of white blood cells in your baby's blood. With infection there may be too many, too few, or more than usual number of young white blood cells.

## How is an infection treated?

Bacterial infections are treated with drugs called antibiotics. There are several different antibiotics. Your baby may be on more than one at a time because no single antibiotic controls all infections. Your baby's doctor will select the ones to control the germs that are most likely causing your baby's infection. Different drugs are used when the infection is caused by a virus or a fungus.

### **Will there be permanent problems from infection?**

Most of the time the baby's infection responds rapidly to antibiotics. Usually there are no permanent problems from infection. Permanent problems are most likely if the baby has meningitis, or if there has been severe low blood pressure for a long period of time.