Pregnancy and Chickenpox

Chicken pox is caused by a virus called Varicella Zoster Virus (VZV). This virus is very contagious and spread through the air and respiratory system. Usually, a red itchy rash develops that forms blisters and later scabs. It happens 10 to 21 days after being around (*exposed*) someone with chickenpox. In pregnant women, chickenpox can cause serious harm to the baby.

SYMPTOMS

- Flu like symptoms develop first.
- Red rash with blisters.
- Blisters turn into scabs.

DIAGNOSIS

In the pregnant woman:

- The diagnosis is easily made when the rash and blisters occur.
- Blood test finding the VZV antigen in the blood.
- Analyzing fluid from the blisters for the virus antigen.

In the fetus:

- Ultrasound of the fetus showing abnormalities when the mother has chickenpox called Congenital Varicella Syndrome including:
  - Heart abnormalities.
  - The fetus is filled with fluid (*hydrops fetalis*).
  - The brain is too small (*microcephaly*).
  - Problems with the arms and legs developing normally.
  - Slow growth of the fetus.

TREATMENT

The mother:

- Antiviral medication (acyclovir) is given by mouth within 24 hours of the rash. It lessens the symptoms, the rash and formation of new blisters. This medicine does not harm the baby.
- Acyclovir is given through the mother's vein if the mother develops pneumonia or encephalitis.
- The acyclovir does not prevent the baby from being affected by the virus.

The baby:

- VariZoster Immine Globulin (VariZIG) is given to the mother if she developed chickenpox five days before delivery. This medicine is given to the newborn two days after delivery.
- Acyclovir is given through the baby's vein if the newborn develops chickenpox within the first two weeks of delivery.

If a pregnant woman gets chicken pox in the second half of the pregnancy, the baby usually is fine because the mother produces antibodies that cross the placenta into the baby. These antibodies protect the baby.

PROTECTION

- Avoid anyone who has chickenpox even if you are immune or had the chickenpox vaccination.
- If you have not had chickenpox as a child, get the chickenpox vaccination before getting pregnant.
- If you are not sure that you had chickenpox in the past, get a blood test to see if you are immune or should be vaccinated.
- Pregnant women exposed to chicken pox should get the VariZIG immunization.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Avoid anyone with chickenpox when pregnant.
- Call your caregiver if you have or think you have been exposed to chickenpox.
- **Do not** scratch the rash or pick the scabs. It can cause scarring.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop flu like symptoms, a rash and blisters.
- You want to get pregnant but do not know if you had chickenpox.
- You are pregnant and one of your children develops chickenpox.
- You develop chickenpox when pregnant and want a genetic counselor.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have chickenpox and develop uterine contractions.
- You have chickenpox and you begin leaking fluid from the vagina.
- You have chickenpox and develop a temperature of 100º F (37.8º C) or higher.
- You have chickenpox and develop shortness of breath.
- You have chickenpox and you develop severe headache.

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