Dear Alice,

Is it okay to breastfeed if I have been treated for MRSA?

Answer

Dear Reader,

MRSA is a serious bacterial infection, so it's wise to be concerned about breastfeeding. Formally known as methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, MRSA is a hardy strain of staph bacteria that is resistant to treatment with commonly used antibiotics and can be detrimental once it gets into the body. MRSA might be contracted in a variety of settings, including hospitals (health care-associated MRSA or HA-MRSA) and within communities (community-associated MRSA or CA-MRSA). In addition, the infection may spread between mother and baby if the baby's skin comes into contact with the mother's discharge or wounds. Because of this, it's possible to spread staph while breastfeeding if there's direct skin to skin contact or if the breast milk has come into contact with the mother's discharge or wounds, contaminating it.

Before getting into more about breastfeeding and MRSA, for those who are unfamiliar, the symptoms of MRSA may include:

- Redness, warmth and tenderness of a wound
- Painful and swollen red bumps
- Pus—a yellowish-white fluid that may have a foul smell
- Fever
- Pneumonia
- Painful abscesses that require surgical draining

In addition, although rare, bacteria may go deep into the body, which might cause serious infections in bones, joints, surgical wounds, the bloodstream, heart valves, and lungs. If you were recently treated for MRSA, you may have been prescribed an antibiotic called vancomycin. This medication can have serious side effects including damage to the kidneys and hearing. The risks of using vancomycin during pregnancy or while breastfeeding haven't been studied. Since MRSA and treatment with vancomycin poses serious health risks, talk with your obstetrician, pediatrician, or another health care provider about ways to protect yourself and your baby.
Although there hasn't been a ton of research on staph and MRSA in pregnant mothers, research hasn't found connections to birth defects or problems with pregnant/breastfeeding moms taking antibiotics. Studies have found that most babies don't experience any side effects after consuming breast milk when mothers take antibiotics. However, some may experience a reaction, such as rashes or diarrhea. If they do, it's advised to contact the child's pediatrician.

If you do choose to breastfeed with active staph, it's crucial that you cover wounds with bandages to prevent the baby from touching the wound or any discharge. Plus, to avoid infection through contaminated breast milk, make sure you fully wash and sterilize pumping equipment and milk containers, as well as washing your hands thoroughly. While the breast milk itself wouldn't be contaminated, it can be contaminated if it comes into contact with the infected areas. In addition, since the staph bacteria may live on non-living organisms, such as bedding, clothing, towels, or household equipment, a baby runs the risk of being infected if they come in contact with infected surfaces. Therefore, keeping surfaces clean and disinfected may be critical during this time.

Alice!
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