

# Protect babies from group B Strep infection



## What is group B Strep?

Group B Streptococcus (GBS or group B Strep) is a natural bacterium carried normally by 20-30% of UK adults. Group B Strep is not a sexually transmitted disease. Carriage has no symptoms, can come and go over time, and means antibiotics should be offered when labour starts.

## What is group B Strep infection?

Although group B Strep infections are relatively uncommon, they can be very serious. **Most babies sick with group B Strep infection recover completely with good medical care.** Even so, one in ten of those infected dies, and at least one in twenty survivors suffers long-term problems. Prevention is better than cure.

Newborn babies are most vulnerable to group B Strep infections, where they cause **septicaemia, pneumonia and meningitis**, and after age 3 months group B Strep infection is very rare. However, group B Strep is the most common cause of bacterial meningitis in babies younger than 3 months. Group B Strep is also the most common cause of infection in newborn babies.

Without preventative medicine, around **1 in 1000 babies a year** would develop group B Strep infection. If Mum is a carrier of group B Strep, this chance rises to around **1 in 300**.

*Most group B Strep infections in babies can be prevented, so knowing about it is good.*

## What do I need to know?

In the UK, the Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists (RCOG) currently recommends a prevention strategy based on "risk-factors". This involves offering women antibiotics at the start of labour when:

- **Group B Strep has been detected from a swab or urine sample taken from mum during current pregnancy**
- **Mum has previously had a baby who had a group B Strep infection**
- **Mum has a fever in labour**

A number of NHS trusts offer group B Strep testing to some or all pregnant women. Ask your midwife or check our website at [www.gbss.org.uk/test](http://www.gbss.org.uk/test) for the latest information.

The Enriched Culture Medium (ECM) test is highly effective at detecting group B Strep carriage and is very good at predicting carriage status for the 5 weeks after the swabs are taken.

Despite being recognised as the 'gold standard' test for group B Strep carriage, the ECM test is not commonly available within the NHS. The NHS uses an "all purpose" test for group B Strep carriage, which will miss half the women carrying group B Strep when the test is taken. This means that even when a mother is carrying group B Strep, she has a 50/50 chance of being told she doesn't when an "all purpose" test is done.

The RCOG does not recommend routine screening of all pregnant women for group B Strep carriage.

Group B Strep Support wants to see all pregnant women being offered ECM tests within the NHS.

## Why test for group B Strep?

The RCOG recommends that when group B Strep is detected during the current pregnancy, Mum should be offered antibiotics at the start of labour to minimise the chance of her newborn baby developing group B Strep infection.

Carrying group B Strep has no symptoms, so can't be identified without testing. As a result, many newborn babies at risk of group B Strep infection will be unprotected by the RCOG's prevention strategy. While most babies born to women carrying group B Strep will not become infected, for those who do, it can be very serious.

A 'gold standard' ECM test can predict group B Strep carriage status, and enable women and their health professionals to plan accordingly.

The UK has fallen behind many other developed countries, including the US, Canada, Germany, France and Spain, which routinely screen for group B Strep at 35-37 weeks of pregnancy and have seen the rate of these infections fall by up to 86%. In the UK, no fall has been seen since the RCOG's prevention strategy was introduced in 2003.

**For the latest on GBS testing visit [www.gbss.org.uk/test](http://www.gbss.org.uk/test)**

## What are the symptoms?

There are no signs or symptoms of simply carrying group B Strep. Signs of group B Strep infection in a newborn baby (0-6 days old) include:

1. Grunting
2. Poor feeding
3. Abnormal drowsiness
4. Irritability
5. High/Low temperature, heart rate or breathing rate

Signs of group B Strep infection in babies aged 7-90 days old include:

1. High temperature, potentially with cold hands/feet
2. Vomiting and refusing feeding/poor feeding
3. High pitched moaning or whimpering cry
4. Blank, staring or trance-like expression
5. Pale, blotchy skin
6. Floppy or dislikes being handled
7. Fretful, lethargic or turning away from bright light
8. Tense or bulging fontanelle
9. Altered breathing pattern and/or involuntary stiff body or jerky movements

If a baby shows any of the above signs, the GP should be called immediately, or the baby taken to the nearest Paediatric Accident & Emergency Department. Early diagnosis and treatment are essential. Delay could be fatal.

## How do I get an ECM test for group B Strep carriage?

Some NHS trusts offer the ECM test for group B Strep carriage, so do ask for it – it requires a low vaginal and rectal swab, which are processed in the laboratory using an enriched culture medium. Do check your Trust is offering this test, and not the more standard 'non-specific' test (usually a high vaginal swab only, cultured on standard agar plates).

ECM tests are available privately and home-testing packs can be obtained from a number of suppliers. Most don't charge for the testing pack but the total cost, including postage, processing the swabs and sending you and your health professionals the result, is about £35.

Group B Strep Support does not offer group B Strep testing packs, nor does it accept money from any of the organisations

which offer it. Group B Strep Support provides information on those laboratories which offer the ECM test, following Public Health England's UK Standards for Microbiology Investigations B 58 Processing Swabs for Group B Streptococcal Carriage, including:

### The Doctor's Laboratory

Tel: 020 7307 7373 | [www.tdlpathology.com/gbs](http://www.tdlpathology.com/gbs)

### Blue Horizon Medicals

Tel: 0800 098 8751 | [www.bluehorizonmedicals.co.uk](http://www.bluehorizonmedicals.co.uk)

### Medichecks

Tel: 0845 602 9029 | [www.medichecks.com](http://www.medichecks.com)

### Medisave

Tel: 0871 288 4380 | [www.medisave.co.uk](http://www.medisave.co.uk)

### Group B Strep Test

[www.groupbstreptest.co.uk](http://www.groupbstreptest.co.uk)

### Well Woman and Baby Room

Tel: 07913 208149

[www.wellwomanandbabyroom.co.uk](http://www.wellwomanandbabyroom.co.uk)

### MedLab Pathology (Republic of Ireland)

Tel: 1800 303 349 | [www.medlabpathology.ie](http://www.medlabpathology.ie)

## For the latest on group B Strep testing, visit [www.gbss.org.uk/test](http://www.gbss.org.uk/test)

Group B Strep Support is a national charity which provides free information materials about group B Strep to families and health professionals. Group B Strep Support wants all pregnant women to be offered sensitive testing on the NHS and to be fully informed about group B Strep.

## What do I do now?

For more information ask your midwife, GP or obstetrician or contact us.



[www.gbss.org.uk](http://www.gbss.org.uk)

## Group B Strep Support

Preventing life-threatening group B Strep infection in newborn babies

[www.gbss.org.uk](http://www.gbss.org.uk)

tel. 01444 416176

