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Congenital rubella

Congenital rubella is a condition that occurs in an infant whose mother is infected with the virus that causes German measles. Congenital means the condition is present at birth.

Causes

Congenital rubella occurs when the rubella virus in the mother affects the developing baby in the first 3 months of pregnancy. After the fourth month, if the mother has a rubella infection, it is less likely to harm the developing baby.

The number of babies born with this condition is much smaller since the rubella vaccine was developed.

Pregnant women and their unborn babies are at risk if:

- They are not vaccinated for rubella
- They have not had the disease in the past

Symptoms

Symptoms in the infant may include:

- Cloudy corneas or white appearance of pupil
- Deafness
- Developmental delay
- Excessive sleepiness
- Irritability
- Low birth weight
- Below average mental functioning (intellectual disability)
- Seizures
- Small head size
- Skin rash at birth

Exams and Tests

The baby's health care provider will order blood and urine tests to check for the virus.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for congenital rubella. The treatment is symptom-based.

Outlook (Prognosis)

The outcome for a child with congenital rubella depends on how severe the problems are. Heart defects can often be corrected. Damage to the nervous system is permanent.

Possible Complications

Complications may involve many parts of the body.

EYES:

- Clouding of the lens of the eye (cataracts)
- Damage to the optic nerve (glaucoma)
- Damage to the retina (retinopathy)

HEART:

- A blood vessel that usually closes shortly after birth remains open (patent ductus arteriosus)
- Narrowing of the large artery that delivers oxygen-rich blood to the heart (pulmonary artery stenosis)
- Other heart defects

CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM:

- Intellectual disability
- Difficulty with physical movement (motor disability)
- Small head from poor brain development
- Brain infection (encephalitis)
- Infection of the spinal column and tissue around the brain (meningitis)

OTHER:

- Deafness
- Low blood platelet count
- Enlarged liver and spleen
- Abnormal muscle tone
- Bone disease

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Contact your provider if:

- You have concerns about congenital rubella.

- You are unsure if you have had the rubella vaccine.
- You or your children need a rubella vaccine.

Prevention

Vaccination prior to pregnancy can prevent this condition. Pregnant women who have not had the vaccine should avoid contact with people who have the rubella virus.

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