Let's Talk ABOUT...

Sepsis in babies

Your baby has been admitted to the hospital because he has a fever. In infants, a fever is any temperature of 100.4ºF (38ºC) or higher. It may be caused by a bacterial or viral infection. If it is a bacterial infection, it is called sepsis. The bacteria may be growing in the bloodstream, urine, or the fluid surrounding the spinal cord. It is much more likely that your baby does not have sepsis (nine out of 10 babies do not), but because sepsis can be dangerous in babies, it is best to check.

How do you know what's wrong?

You may have noticed that your baby is more sleepy, having more breathing difficulty, not eating well, has a fever, and/or is more fussy than usual. These are common signs of either a bacterial or viral infection in a young baby.

The doctors want to find out if your baby is ill from bacteria. To do this, your baby will have several tests to study the urine, the blood, and the fluid surrounding the brain and spinal cord. Your baby will receive viral testing and antibiotics because antibiotics fight bacterial infections. Your baby will receive the antibiotics through a tiny tube (IV) placed in the vein of his foot, ankle, hand, arm, or scalp.

After 24 to 36 hours, the doctors will know whether or not bacteria has been found in your baby's body fluid. Often, no bacteria are found and your baby can safely go home without antibiotics or other medicines. He probably had a cold or another viral illness. If a bacterial infection is found, you child will receive antibiotics.

What happens in the hospital?

While your baby is in the hospital, the nursing staff will check up on your baby often. His temperature and pulse will be closely followed. He will be placed on a heart monitor for observation. The nurse will feed your child and change his diapers. If you would like to help feed and change your baby, you are welcome — just ask his nurse. All diapers will be weighed to make sure your baby is making enough urine. He may be given acetaminophen (Tylenol®) to help reduce the fever. Never give your child aspirin because it is linked to a serious liver and brain disease called Reye's syndrome.

What happens when my child goes home?

Once your baby goes home, he will probably not need medicine or extra monitoring. Sometimes babies with bacterial infections of the blood receive antibiotics at home. You would give these to your baby by mouth or in an IV. Either way, you will receive instructions on how to give these medicines before your child goes home. Your baby should grow and develop normally. Carry through with the directions given to you when your child leaves the hospital. Follow up with his doctor for well-baby visits and when your baby gets sick.

Regular hand washing is the best way to prevent infection. Also, make sure people who are sick don't get close to your baby. Children and adults handling young infants should be up-to-date with vaccinations.

If you have any questions, please ask his nurse.

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