

Honeycomb Midwives



Preventative use of Erythromycin (eye ointment) on Newborns

Conjunctivitis is an eye infection of the newborn contracted during birth. It is most commonly caused by the transfer of chlamydia or gonorrhoea from mother to baby. It looks like red, swollen eyelids and runny, sticky, or puss discharge from the eyes. If left untreated it can cause blindness. There is the possibility of meningitis and blood infection in severe cases of infant chlamydia or gonorrhoea.

Screening for Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea

The rate of infant conjunctivitis caused by chlamydia or gonorrhoea was 4.5 per 100,000 in Ontario in 2004. These low rates are due to prenatal screening and treatment of the infected mother during pregnancy. Screening and treatment at the beginning of pregnancy are also the standard of care in Alberta. There is no way to guarantee that maternal infection is not contracted after testing and before birth. Re-screening for chlamydia and gonorrhoea in the third trimester is an option to be considered.

Treatment

Erythromycin is an antibiotic ointment that has been routinely applied into the eyes of newborns for decades in Canada, with the goal of preventing conjunctivitis caused by chlamydia or gonorrhoea. In some territories and provinces it is the law that it be applied.

It does not treat or prevent a baby from being infected with chlamydia or gonorrhoea via the nose or throat.

The Canadian Paediatric Society released a statement in 2015 stating “topical ocular prophylaxis does not prevent transmission from mother to infant, does not reliably prevent neonatal conjunctivitis and does not prevent pneumonia.” CPS no longer recommends routine application of erythromycin to all newborns in Canada.

This hand-out is not meant to replace discussion with your midwife, rather, it is to act as a tool to facilitate informed choice. Talk to your midwife about your options and your thoughts.

References:

Canadian Paediatric Society. (2015). Position Statement: Preventing Ophthalmia Neonatorum.

Darling, McDonald, E. (2010). *A meta analysis of the efficacy of ocular prophylaxis agents used of the prevention of gonoccal and chlamydial ophthalmia neonatorum*. *Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health*. 55(4), 319-327.