

Three Minute Article for Parents

Infections in the newborn

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Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health, 2020; **49**(2): 202

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4038/sljch.v49i2.8976>

(Key words: newborn, features of infection, prevention of infection)

A newborn is categorized as a baby less than one month of age. Newborn babies develop infection much more easily than older infants and children. They tolerate infection less effectively and as a result, may get long-term complications or succumb to the infection, if these go undetected and are not treated early.

A study done in 2015 revealed that, out of around six million deaths in the under 5-year-olds globally, close to half died within the newborn period. It is established that infection is one out of the four major causes which lead to deaths in newborn babies. Hence it is very important for hospital staff, public health staff and the community at large to have a satisfactory understanding about the preventive steps that need to be taken against infection, how to recognize signs of infection and consequences of missing early signs of infections in newborn babies. A recent study done regarding knowledge on newborn infection at a Teaching Hospital revealed that almost all nurses involved in neonatal care had satisfactory knowledge regarding newborn infection¹.

Commonly observed features of infection in the newborn are temperature changes in the baby (temperatures less than 36⁰C or more than 37.5⁰C), poor feeding or refusal of feeding or feeding intolerance, poor activity, skin mottling, breathing difficulty (rapid, shallow, laboured or short spells of breath-holding). A valuable clue to infection may be a mother or a caregiver noting that the “baby is not looking right” though they cannot pinpoint a specific sign.

Regarding the prevention of infection, the most important step to be taken is hand hygiene. Cleaning hands using soap and running water or a commercially available hand rub by the mother and all care givers at all times before handling the baby is the most effective and universally recommended preventive tool against infection.

If an infection is suspected, the most important step to be taken is to take the baby to a health facility at the earliest opportunity. Early management with supportive care and appropriate medication will help towards elimination of the infection.

Infection missed or managed too late may lead to death or various degrees of debility in isolation or combination. These may include subtle learning difficulties, visual problems, hearing deficiencies, speech disorders, movement problems, convulsions and mental retardation.

Reference

1. Hewamalage P, Siriwardhane HVDN, Aththanayake APRD, Amarasekara S, Weerasekera M. Nurses’ knowledge on neonatal sepsis in a tertiary care hospital in Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health* 2019; **48**(4):316-20.