Health Advisory
Activities to Improve Testing for Perinatal Hepatitis C
January 5, 2015

The American Association for the Study of Liver Disease (AASLD) recommends (https://bit.ly/AASLDGuidelines) that infants born to women who test positive for hepatitis C virus (HCV) be screened with:

- An anti-HCV antibody test with reflex to HCV RNA at ≥ 18 months of age*
  *Positive HCV antibody results obtained from a child < 18 months of age could be the result of maternal infection, and should be repeated after 18 months.

Children who are perinatally-infected with HCV are at high risk of chronic infection, and subsequent development of serious sequelae including cirrhosis and liver failure. However, anti-viral treatment is now approved for children aged 3 years and older, and may be curative.

A recent analysis conducted by the Philadelphia Department of Public Health’s Hepatitis Epidemiology Program found that most infants born to women who test positive for hepatitis C virus are not being appropriately screened. Of the approximately 500 children born to HCV-positive mothers during 2011-2013, only 5% were adequately tested for HCV. If 5-10% of infants born to HCV-infected mothers are perinatally-infected (published estimate), at least 22 of these 500 children are unknowingly at risk of developing chronic liver disease from HCV. Failure to test at-risk children for HCV is likely because pediatric-care providers are unaware of the mother’s infection status, and the mother is unaware of HCV transmission risk to the child.

To address this problem, the Health Department is launching a program to promote perinatal HCV testing in Philadelphia, by:

1) Notifying HCV-infected mothers with children aged 18-24 months to urge them to request HCV testing at their child’s 2-year well visit.

2) Offering in-service trainings on perinatal HCV transmission, local epidemiology, and screening guidelines at Philadelphia obstetric and pediatric practices, and birth hospitals.

3) Providing resources for pediatric and obstetric providers about HCV including lists of local pediatric specialists, educational posters, and screening for under-insured children.

To aid this effort, please report all positive and negative HCV test results for children born to HCV-positive mothers to the Health Department by secure FAX to 215-238-6947. If you have any questions about perinatal HCV transmission or need additional information, please contact the Hepatitis Epidemiology Program (215-685-6493 or HEP-DDC@phila.gov).