

The Rh Factor

The “Rh factor” is part of red blood cells. Everyone has either Rh “positive” or Rh “negative” blood. Rh “positive” blood is more common than “negative.” No one blood type is better than the other.

The type of blood is important only when blood is going to be received in a transfusion, or when an Rh “negative” mom becomes pregnant by an Rh “positive” dad.

If dad is “positive” and mom “negative,” the baby has a 50/50 chance of being either “positive” or “negative.” When baby is “positive,” a very special situation occurs.

When the baby is delivered, there is a chance that some of this baby’s “positive” blood may go into mom’s “negative” blood stream. If this happens, mom’s blood will form antibodies. These antibodies kill off or attack anything foreign to her body. This delivered baby will not be harmed or affected by these antibodies, but the antibodies, once produced by mom’s blood, become a permanent part of her blood. So if mom becomes pregnant again, and her unborn baby has a “positive” Rh, the antibodies in her blood will “fight” the unborn baby’s “positive” blood cells. If this happens, the unborn baby might get anemia, jaundice, brain damage, or even die.

If the baby is born alive, it will have Rh Hemolytic Disease of the Newborn. The baby with this disease will need a lot of medical care. For example, the baby’s blood may need to be exchanged for new blood.

Rh disease of the Newborn may be prevented if the Rh “negative” mom has a “shot” of Rhogam at 28 weeks of pregnancy and within 72 hours after the delivery of her Rh “positive” baby. The shot is usually given in the hip or buttock area.

The way Rhogam works is very simple. It keeps mom’s blood from seeing baby’s blood as foreign. In this way, it stops the antibodies from forming. This means that there is no danger to mom’s next baby.

An Rh “negative” mom may need to have Rhogam with every pregnancy and after each delivery. If she ever becomes pregnant and loses the baby because of a miscarriage or stillbirth, she may also need to have Rhogam. If her baby is Rh “negative,” mom will not need Rhogam.