

Answers to Some Common Questions about Rhesus Immune Globulin

This handout has some medical words. See page 5 for definitions and talk to your doctor or midwife about the questions you have.

What is the Rhesus Factor?

There are many blood types or groups. The most important are the ABO system and the Rhesus (Rh) system. Rhesus (Rh) factor is a protein found on the surface of red blood cells. Some people have the Rhesus factor and some don't.

What does Rhesus Positive mean?

When you have the Rhesus factor on your red blood cells, you are Rhesus positive. You will not need to have Rhesus Immune Globulin.

What does Rhesus Negative mean?

You are Rhesus negative because you do not have the Rhesus factor on your red blood cells. Being Rhesus negative can cause problems during pregnancy.

How can being Rhesus Negative cause problems during pregnancy?

When you are Rhesus negative and if your baby is Rhesus positive, you are at risk of

making Rhesus antibodies. You will not know your baby's blood type until after the birth.

These antibodies can destroy your baby's red blood cells and cause a serious problem called hemolytic disease of the newborn.

Complications of Hemolytic disease of the newborn can range from mild to severe:

- low hemoglobin (anemia)
- buildup of bilirubin in the blood (jaundice)
- harm to the brain due to high levels of bilirubin in the baby's blood
- death (rarely)

Once your body makes antibodies, they do not go away. Each time you get pregnant, the risk to your baby is more serious.

Hemolytic Disease of the Newborn can be prevented

Hemolytic disease of the newborn is prevented in 99.9 percent ¹ of Rhesus negative women who get Rhesus immune globulin.

Why am I getting Rhesus Immune Globulin

Rhesus immune globulin is given if you are Rhesus negative and:

- are 28 weeks pregnant
- give birth to a Rhesus positive baby
- have a miscarriage or an abortion
- have a procedure such as amniocentesis, or chorionic villous sampling or manual

pressure on your abdomen to change the baby's position

- have bleeding from your vagina or an injury to your belly during pregnancy

If you already have Rhesus antibodies, then your doctor or midwife will not give you Rhesus immune globulin.

Do I need Rhesus Immune Globulin each time I get pregnant?

Yes, the Rhesus immune globulin only works for a short time, so you will need Rhesus immune globulin each time you get pregnant, and more than once with each pregnancy.

Are there any other treatment choices?

No, there are no other treatment choices.

If you are worried about getting Rhesus immune globulin, talk to your doctor or midwife.

What if I choose not to get Rhesus Immune Globulin?

Without Rhesus Immune Globulin, there is a 12 to 16 percent ¹ chance you will form Rhesus antibodies that can harm your baby. The risk grows with each pregnancy.

Where does Rhesus Immune Globulin come from?

Rhesus immune globulin is made from a part of blood called plasma from donors who have antibodies to Rhesus. The brand used in Canada is called WinRho®.

Is Rhesus Immune Globulin safe?

Like any medical treatment, Rhesus immune globulin has some risks. The chance of getting an infection is very small. All blood donors are asked many questions about their health before they give blood. All blood is also tested for the infectious diseases such as HIV and AIDS, Hepatitis B and C and syphilis.

Rhesus Immune Globulin goes through a lot of steps to make sure it is safe and will not cause infection. No one in Canada has ever had a serious infection like hepatitis or HIV due to Rhesus Immune Globulin.

Are there any side effects of Rhesus Immune Globulin?

You will be checked during and after your Rhesus immune globulin injection to make sure you are doing okay. Most people who get Rhesus immune globulin have no side effects. Rarely, Rhesus immune globulin can cause you to have or feel:

- pain at the injection site
- a headache
- rash or itching
- weak and unwell
- hot or feverish

Side effects are mostly mild and do not last long.

Please let your doctor or midwife know if you have had side effects to Rhesus immune globulin in the past.

What should I do if I have side effects after I go home?

If you have side effects after you go home call your doctor or midwife. Go to a clinic or hospital if the side effect is serious. Tell the staff that you had a Rhesus immune globulin injection.

What happens if I get Rhesus Immune Globulin?

Before you get Rhesus immune globulin your doctor or midwife should talk with you about:

- the reason why you need Rhesus immune globulin
- how Rhesus immune globulin will help
- the risks of Rhesus immune globulin
- what might happen if you say no to Rhesus immune globulin
- how Rhesus immune globulin is given

You should have had a chance to ask questions and ask your doctor or midwife any questions you have and give yourself time to decide. If you say yes to Rhesus Immune Globulin, you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you say no to Rhesus Immune Globulin, you will be asked to sign a “Refusal to Consent” form.

Rhesus immune globulin is mostly given by injection into a muscle; this is called an intramuscular or IM injection.

If you get Rhesus immune globulin in hospital, two nurses will ask you your name and date of birth and, check your hospital bracelet, before they give you the Rhesus immune globulin injection. You will be watched, during and after the injection.

Storage of Rhesus Immune Globulin

If you collect Rhesus immune globulin from Women’s Hospital to take to your doctor’s or midwife’s office, please store it in your fridge at home until your visit. Do not leave the Rhesus Immune Globulin in your car on very hot or very cold day.

The meaning of some medical words used in this handout

Rhesus (Rhe-sus) is a substance that is on the red blood cells of most people.

Globulin (glob-u-lin) is a protein.

Immune Globulin is a substance in blood that helps fight disease.

Antigen (an-ti-gen) is a substance that causes the body to make antibodies.

Antibodies are proteins the body makes to protect itself when it reacts with something that is new.

Plasma is a part of blood; it is a yellowish colour and contains antibodies.

Anemia is a condition when there are a low number of red blood cells.

Infectious diseases are diseases that can be passed from person to person.

HIV is Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus that causes AIDS.

AIDS is Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. A sickness caused by a virus that wipes out the body's power to fight germs.

Miscarriage is the loss of pregnancy that happens when the fetus has been in the womb for 20 weeks or less.

Abortion is the removal of a fetus or embryo to end a pregnancy.

Amniocentesis is a test to look at the amniotic fluid that surrounds your baby.

Chorionic Villus Sampling is a test that is done to see if a baby may be born with serious health problems.

External Cephalic Version is a procedure used to turn a fetus from a breech (feet down) position or side-lying position into a head-down position before labour begins.

Side effects are the unintended results of a medication or treatment.

1. Fung K, Eason E (2003). Prevention of Rhesus alloimmunization. SOGC Clinical Practice Guidelines No. 133. Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada, 25(9): 765–773. Also available online: <http://www.sogc.org/guidelines/documents/133E-CPG-September2003.pdf>.

