

In Hepatitis B Vaccine Debate, CDC Panel Sidesteps Key Exposure Risk

Babies infected at birth have a 90% chance of chronic hepatitis B, and a quarter of those will have severe complications, like liver cancer.

October 6, 2025 By Jackie Fortiér and KFF Health News

The Trump administration is continuing its push to revise federal guidelines to delay the hepatitis B vaccine newborn dose for most children. This comes despite a failed attempt to do so at the most recent meeting of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices.

Both President Donald Trump and some newly appointed ACIP members have mischaracterized how the liver disease spreads, according to medical experts, including those working at the CDC. The ACIP panel's recommendations can determine insurance coverage for immunizations.

At a White House press conference on September 22, Trump, in advocating for delaying the newborn vaccine dose, falsely claimed that hepatitis B is solely a sexually transmitted infection.

"Hepatitis B is sexually transmitted. There's no reason to give a baby that's almost just born hepatitis B. So I would say wait till the baby is 12 years old and formed and take hepatitis B," Trump said.

Hepatitis B is a highly infectious virus that attacks the liver and is transmitted through contact with infected bodily fluids, including blood. It can also be passed from mother to baby.

A reporter asked if Trump had spoken with Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who oversees the CDC, about making the change, and Trump said he had, as Kennedy looked on.

Although hepatitis B is often associated with high-risk behaviors such as injection drug use or having multiple sexual partners, [health experts](#), including career CDC scientists, note that the virus can be transmitted in ordinary situations too, including among young children.

At the latest ACIP meeting, held September 18 and 19, members debated postponing the hepatitis B newborn dose until 1 month of age.

CDC scientist [Adam Langer](#) outlined research showing incidences of unvaccinated children born in the U.S. to mothers who tested negative, later becoming infected with hepatitis B. Langer serves as acting principal deputy director for the National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and Tuberculosis Prevention.

Langer told the vaccine advisory panel that the virus can survive for [over seven days](#) outside the body on surfaces. During that time, contact with even microscopic traces of infected blood on a [school desk or on playground or sporting equipment](#) is enough for a child to be infected. This means unvaccinated children not considered at high risk can still be exposed in everyday environments, or by an infected caregiver.

“We do have data that says that it can happen and that it is likely to happen,” he said. Though the exact cause of infection may not be clear in documented cases of children of hepatitis B-negative mothers becoming infected, “I can tell you that it didn’t come from the mother and it didn’t come from injection drug use and it didn’t come from sexual contact, so that means that it had to have been some kind of casual contact,” Langer said.

Yet during the debate, some members gave little credence to the risk of transmission to children through household contact.

“This is a very, very important vaccine that should be given to the high-risk populations,” said ACIP voting member [Retsef Levi](#), a professor of operations management at the MIT Sloan School of Management. “The high-risk populations seem to be babies born to hep B-positive mothers, drug addicts, and other populations at high risk,” he said, despite Langer’s presentation highlighting other avenues of possible transmission.

Contrary to research that was presented, Levi later said the risk of not vaccinating children of hepatitis B-negative mothers was “probably close to zero” in the first few years of life.

The CDC estimates 2.4 million people in the U.S. have hepatitis B and half [do not know](#) they are infected. The disease can range from an acute, mild infection to a chronic infection, often with [few to no symptoms](#). The disease has no cure and, if left untreated, can lead to serious conditions like cirrhosis, liver failure, and liver cancer later in life.

During debate on the vote to delay the newborn dose, ACIP member [Joseph Hibbeln](#) said that the proposed one-month gap would leave some children vulnerable to the virus, even if their mothers test negative for hepatitis B.

“This assumes implicitly that all the infections are coming from moms,” Hibbeln said. “You can’t decide on that simply by the mother’s status. You would have to look at the entire household’s status.”

ACIP member Evelyn Griffin, an obstetrician and gynecologist, asserted that doctors could ascertain an entire household’s hepatitis B status by asking the mother.

“How are they going to know?” Hibbeln said. “If 50% of people don’t know that they are hepatitis B-positive, you can ask all you want, and nobody knows.”

The committee members, all handpicked by Kennedy, ultimately decided to table the vote on whether to delay the newborn dose after Hibbeln brought up inconsistencies in the wording of the text of the resolution.

“The notion that hepatitis B is only confined to transmission for prostitutes, drug users, etc. is such an ignorant and uninformed way of approaching infectious disease,” internist [Jason Goldman](#), the president of the American College of Physicians and its liaison to ACIP, said when reached after the meeting.

“The virus does not care what your behavior or lifestyle is. The virus goes from person to person through bodily fluids,” Goldman said. It can be transmitted when an unvaccinated person touches infected bodily fluids on common surfaces and then accidentally touches the eyes or mouth. “What if someone was in a car accident and got exposed to blood?”

“It is not only mother-to-fetus transmission, it is not only certain risk groups,” he said. “This is why it’s universal; everyone should get this for their protection, and it is unfortunate that it is being politicized into a sexually transmitted disease and that’s it. That’s not an appropriate way to evaluate science.”

Pediatric vaccination recommendations are [widely credited](#) with nearly eliminating the virus in American-born children.

Babies infected at birth have a 90% chance of developing chronic hepatitis B, and a quarter of those children go on to have severe complications, like liver cancer, or to die from the disease.

In 1991, federal health officials determined newborns should receive their first dose of a hepatitis B vaccine within [24 hours of birth](#), which can block the virus from taking hold if transmitted during delivery. From 1990 to 2022, case rates of hepatitis B declined by more than 99%. While parents may opt out of the shots, many day care centers and school districts [require proof](#) of hepatitis B vaccination for enrollment.

The next meeting of the ACIP is scheduled to begin October 22. Agendas are usually posted weeks in advance, but so far, no information on the substance of the upcoming meeting has appeared on the CDC’s website. The agenda for the September meeting was posted less than a week before the meeting’s start.

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