A WORD ABOUT BLOOD TRANSFUSIONS...

Many parents worry whether their infant will require a blood transfusion while he/she is in the intensive care nursery. Therefore, it is important for parents to understand why babies sometimes need to receive transfusions. The following commonly asked questions and their answers are meant to help you understand about treatment of newborns with blood transfusions.

Why Do Babies Need Blood?

Blood carries oxygen to all the organs of the body. When humans do not have enough red blood cells (anemia) they have symptoms of too little oxygen supply. These symptoms include feeling tired, being pale, shortness of breath, and a fast heart rate. In newborn infants the symptoms of anemia are not as specific but may include trouble with feeding and gaining weight, fast heart beat, and irregular breathing pattern.

Under What Circumstances Might My Infant Require a Transfusion for Anemia?

Not all cases of anemia in babies need treatment with a transfusion. We do not transfuse babies unless it is necessary. The most common situations for which a transfusion is needed are discussed below:

1. Sometimes the fetus can develop acute anemia due to blood loss at the time of delivery (especially during difficult deliveries) and may need an emergency transfusion immediately after birth in order to replace the lost blood.
2. During the first few weeks of life, babies who are ill and need intensive care will often need many blood tests so they can be carefully monitored. Blood withdrawn for testing may have to be replaced by a transfusion. Smaller, sicker babies will need more intensive monitoring, more blood tests, and therefore more transfusions. Additionally, babies who are receiving supplemental oxygen often require transfusions periodically in order to keep their number of red blood cells at levels which allow better oxygen carrying to all tissues.
3. All premature infants go through a period in their life when they develop the “anemia of prematurity.” During this period (which can last as long as 12 weeks) preterm babies don’t make enough red blood cells. During the anemia of prematurity, many infants can become severely anemic and require transfusion.

How Safe Are Blood Tranfusions?

All blood transfusions are given with blood that is voluntarily donated to the Red Cross of Central N.Y.. The donors are carefully screened and blood is thoroughly checked prior to use. We are fortunate in Central New York to be designated a low risk area by the Red Cross and therefore the chance of an infection (AIDS virus, hepatitis etc.) due to a blood transfusion is extremely low.

The above discussion does not include all the situations for which newborn infants are given transfusions. The doctors and nurses who care for your baby are always happy to answer other questions you may have. As caregivers to your infant we try to avoid blood transfusions whenever possible but hopefully this discussion has helped you understand why babies in the intensive care nursery need blood transfusions.