



HEPATITIS B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an inflammation (infection) of the liver caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). The virus attacks the liver and interferes with its ability to change food into energy, store and break down fats, and help with blood clotting. It also affects its ability to filter harmful substances from the blood. Specific laboratory tests help to determine hepatitis B from other forms of viruses.

Hepatitis B affects people of all ages and is widespread throughout the world. Most people will completely recover from the illness. About 1 in 10 adults will not clear the virus from the blood and will become chronically (permanently) infected with the virus. In the U. S., about 1.25 million people have chronic HBV infection with 4,000-5,000 deaths every year due to its complications. Hepatitis B is 100 times more infectious than the AIDS virus.

What are the signs and symptoms of hepatitis B?

The time period from exposure to the virus to onset of symptoms, is usually 6 weeks- 6 months with an average of 90-120 days. People who get hepatitis B when they are babies or children usually do not appear or feel sick. Older individuals or adults are more likely to show signs of infection. However, it is not uncommon for individuals to have very mild symptoms or no symptoms at all. Symptoms of acute illness may include: jaundice (yellowing of the eyes or skin), loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, extreme fatigue, or dark-colored urine or gray-colored stool.

How is hepatitis B transmitted or spread?

Hepatitis B is passed by contact with **BLOOD** or other **BODY FLUIDS** (semen and vaginal fluids) of an infected person into the body of an unvaccinated or susceptible person. The virus is not found in sweat, tears, urine or respiratory secretions. It is not spread by sneezing, coughing, sharing dishes, or holding hands. Transmission may occur in the following ways:

- unprotected sex (without the use of condoms)
- during birth from an infected mother to baby
- contact with open skin sores or cuts
- human bites (with a break in the skin that draws blood)
- sharing personal items like razors or toothbrushes
- pre-chewing food for babies
- sharing chewing gum
- sharing “dirty” or unsterilized needles or “works” when “shooting” drugs
- using unsterile needles in body piercing or acupuncture
- using unsterile needles or dipping into unsterile (previously used) ink during tattooing
- by living in a household with a person infected with the hepatitis B virus

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

There are ways a person can be protected from the hepatitis B virus. An important way to lessen the risk of getting the illness is by making changes in behavior and/or lifestyles. Since 1982, a safe and effective vaccine has been available that consists of a series of 3 shots given over a 4-6 month period. There are certain behaviors, situations or occupations that put individuals at increased chance of exposure to the hepatitis B virus. Those at most risk are those who:

- have a job that exposes you to human blood (e.g. health care, dental care or public safety workers)
- live in the same house with someone with acute or chronic HBV
- inject illegal drugs
- have sex with a person infected with hepatitis B virus
- have sex with multiple partners and repeatedly get sexually transmitted diseases (such as chlamydia or gonorrhea)
- are men having sex with men
- have hemophilia (or other disorders that require blood transfusions or blood products)
- received blood transfusions/hemodialysis prior to 1975
- are inmates of a long-term correctional facility
- were born in or travel to regions of the world where hepatitis B is common (such as Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, Middle East, areas of South America)
- are infants born to a mothers who are hepatitis B carriers

What about testing and hepatitis B shots for contacts?

It is important that all household members and sexual partners are protected against hepatitis B. The hepatitis B series is safe and effective vaccine. It is usually given in three (3) doses over a six month time interval. For sexual contacts, a blood test is also recommended to determine previous infection before the first vaccine. Upon completion of the series, another blood test should be done to make sure vaccine has worked.

What about hepatitis B and pregnancy?

Early prenatal care is important for the health and safety of the every pregnant female as well as the unborn child. During early pregnancy, a blood test is recommended to check for the hepatitis B virus. Approximately 24,000 women with chronic HBV infection give birth in the U.S. each year, and many do not know they are infected. Infants infected at birth have a 90% chance of becoming chronically infected with HBV.

Therefore, It is recommended that *every* baby receive the first dose of Hepatitis B vaccine at birth to protect the newborn from hepatitis B virus infection. It's important that the baby completes the 3-4 doses series of the vaccine. If the mother is considered to be a carrier of the hepatitis virus, the infant will also need another injection (shot) called HBIG which gives added protection to the baby.

A mother with hepatitis B can safely breastfeed her newborn.

What does it mean to be a HBV carrier?

Most adults will recover from acute illness after several months. Their body clears the infection and they become immune. This means that they won't get the hepatitis B virus again and can't pass the virus to others. Others develop chronic hepatitis B and are referred to as hepatitis B *carriers*. An individual with chronic disease never fully recovers and will "carry" the virus in their blood (and other body fluids) for the rest of his/her life. Babies and young children who become infected are at a

much higher chance of becoming carriers than do adults. A carrier usually does not feel sick but is contagious and can pass HBV to others. Later in life, a carrier may develop due to cirrhosis (scarring), cancer of the liver and liver failure.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis B?

If you have been told that you may have acute or chronic HBV, it is important that you contact your physician's office for follow-up. Six months after a recent diagnosis of hepatitis B, blood work is needed to determine if you are a carrier or if you have completely recovered.

Your doctor may refer you to a specialist in diseases of the liver. He or she will evaluate your treatment options. Not every person with chronic HBV needs or may benefit from treatment. Currently, there are several approved drugs to treat chronic hepatitis B. These drugs slow down the activity of the virus and reduce potential liver damage.

What can YOU do to protect others from Hepatitis B?

Carriers, or persons with chronic hepatitis B infection, generally may feel healthy, but can pass the hepatitis B infection to other people. In order to protect others from getting hepatitis B, it is important to protect them from contact with your infected blood and other body fluids.

DO NOT:

- share chewing gum, toothbrushes, razors, needles for ear piercing, or anything that may have come in contact with your blood or body fluids.
- pre-chew food for babies.
- share syringes and needles, or other "works".
- donate blood, plasma, body organs, tissue, or sperm.

DO:

- tell **all** of your dentists and doctors about your hepatitis B status.
- cover all cuts and open sores with a bandage.
- throw away used personal items such as tissues, menstrual pads, or tampons in a paper bag.
- wash your hands well after touching your blood or body fluids.
- wipe up blood spills. (Avoid direct skin contact with blood) Then clean area with a diluted bleach solution (1/4cup household bleach to 1 gallon of water).
- use condoms (rubbers) during sex unless your partner has had hepatitis B or has had the shots and a blood test to be sure the shots worked.
- avoid alcohol. Use of alcohol can cause further assault or damage to your liver.

IMPORTANT REMINDERS!

- ✓ See your doctor at least once a year. Regular check-ups and blood tests will monitor how the liver is working and check for early signs of liver failure and cancer
- ✓ Inform your doctors of **all** prescribed and over-the-counter drugs you are taking, including vitamins and herbal supplements. Some medications and supplements can be harmful to your liver. Also serious drug interactions may happen.
- ✓ Share information about hepatitis B with household members and sexual contacts.
- ✓ If you are pregnant, assure that your doctor is aware that you are a hepatitis B carrier.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT HEPATITIS:

American Liver Foundation

NATIONAL HELPLINE @ 1-800-GO-LIVER (1-800- 465-4837)

REGIONAL HEARTLAND DIVISION (Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky) @ 1-877-548-3730

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/index.htm>

Hepatitis B Foundation <http://www.hepb.org>

Minnesota Department of Health <http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/idepc/diseases/hepc/index.html>