

Hepatitis B

Frequently Asked Questions

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis (hep-AH-ty-tis) B is the world's most common serious liver infection. It is caused by a virus which attacks the liver and can cause cirrhosis, liver cancer, or liver failure.

Who can get hepatitis B?

Anyone who has not already had hepatitis B illness or has not received the hepatitis B vaccine can get hepatitis B, but those at greatest risk are:

- People who share needles or syringes with others to inject drugs
- People who have multiple sex partners or a history of a sexually transmitted disease
- Health, dental and emergency care personnel who have contact with blood
- Infants who are born to mothers who are infected with hepatitis B
- Household and sexual contacts of infected people
- Staff and clients of hemodialysis units and institutions for the developmentally disabled
- Immigrants and adoptees from areas of the world where hepatitis B illness is frequent

How do people get hepatitis B?

The hepatitis B virus is spread by contact with infected people's blood, semen, or other body fluids. People can get hepatitis B by having sex with someone who has the disease without a condom; by sharing drug needles, straws, crack pipes, razors, nail clippers or toothbrushes with an infected person; or having an unsterile tattoo or body piercing done. Health care workers can be exposed to the virus by needlestick injury.

Hepatitis B is not spread by hugging or shaking hands with an infected person, sitting near an infected person or other casual contact, breathing the same air or from food or water.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Some people do not have symptoms of hepatitis B. Symptoms of hepatitis B infection include

- Tiredness
- Nausea
- Fever
- Diarrhea
- Lack of appetite
- Dark yellow urine
- Yellowish skin or eyes

Can people with hepatitis B give the disease to others?

People with hepatitis B can give it to others as long as the virus is in their blood. This is usually two months before and 2 months after they have symptoms of hepatitis B illness. Carriers of hepatitis B are able to transmit hepatitis B for the rest of their lives.

People with hepatitis B should use condoms during every sexual encounter (anal or vaginal). They should also inform their partner(s) that they have hepatitis B and recommend that they get the hepatitis B vaccine.

All pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B during pregnancy. If you know you have the virus, inform your doctor and hospital staff so that they can better care for your baby.

Almost 90% of untreated babies whose mothers have hepatitis B develop the disease. It is safe for mothers infected with hepatitis B to breastfeed. Other household members should also be tested and receive the vaccine if they are not already infected.

Who should get the hepatitis B vaccine?

The vaccine is given to all children in the United States and is recommended for all high-risk adults. This includes people who have sexually transmitted diseases, who are injection drug users, or who have had multiple sex partners. The vaccine is given in 3 doses over 6 months. It is very effective when a person receives all 3 doses.

Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?

The hepatitis B vaccine has few side effects. The most common reaction is soreness at the injection site.

How else can I protect myself from hepatitis B?

- Get the hepatitis B vaccine
- Use condoms when having sex
- Get tattoos or body piercings from people who use sterile inks and tools
- Do not share personal care items such as, razors, toothbrushes, or anything that could have blood on it
- Do not share drug needles
- Wear gloves when touching other people's blood or body fluids

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

Treatment for chronic hepatitis B (infection over six months of time) includes interferon, lamivudine or other similar medication. Interferon is given by injection for 4 months. Lamivudine is taken in pill form. If your liver is severely damaged, a liver transplant may be recommended. There is often a long waiting list for transplants. People with hepatitis B should not drink alcohol (or should cut back how much they drink), not eat raw seafood and should consider being vaccinated against hepatitis A.

Will hepatitis B go away without treatment?

Most adults are able to fight off the infection and clear the virus from their blood. However, 55 to 10% of adults, 30% to 50% of children, and 90% of infants will NOT get rid of the virus on their own and will develop chronic infection. If a person also has HIV, the hepatitis B infection is more likely to become a long-term disease.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

People with hepatitis B should not be excluded from work or school. They should be counseled, however, regarding the precautions they should take to reduce the chance of exposing others to their blood or body fluids.

Where can I get more information?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/b/

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention