

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that enters the bloodstream and then infects the liver. Clinical signs and symptoms occur more often in adults than in infants or children. Approximately 10% of all people infected with hepatitis B will stay infected for a lifetime, however infants and young children infected with hepatitis B have a 90 percent chance of becoming lifelong carriers of the disease. Long-term infection may result in liver disease or cancer.

Who gets hepatitis B?

Anyone can get hepatitis B. However, certain people have a greater chance of becoming infected; these people include babies born to hepatitis-b positive mothers, IV drug users, sexual partners of infected persons, and medical and dental workers.

How is the hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is most often spread from person to person through contact with infected semen, vaginal secretions, or blood. Having sex with an infected person and sharing needles for drug use are two very common ways that people become infected. Babies born to infected mothers and people who live in the house with a "carrier" of hepatitis B are also at risk.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis B?

Symptoms may be mild or they may be very severe. Symptoms may include extreme tiredness, nausea, vomiting, fever, headache, skin rashes, stomach pain, tea-colored urine, and yellowing of skin and eyes (jaundice). Most people infected with hepatitis B do not develop all symptoms and may never know they are infected.

How soon do the symptoms of Hepatitis B appear?

Loss of appetite and stomach pain commonly appears within 2 to 3 months, but can occur from 6 weeks to 6 months after infection.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

A person can spread the virus as long as it remains in their blood. Most adults will get rid of the virus within 4 to 6 months; however, about 1 out of every 10 infected adults will become lifelong "carriers", meaning they will probably never get rid of the virus. Nine out of 10 infected babies will become life-long "carriers". Most hepatitis B carriers have no symptoms of hepatitis, but some will develop serious liver disease years later. Most hepatitis B carriers do not look or feel sick. However, they may eventually develop serious liver diseases such as cirrhosis or liver cancer. Even though carriers may feel healthy, they can still spread the hepatitis B virus to other people.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

A blood test is used to detect infection with the hepatitis B virus.

Can a person get hepatitis B again?

If antibodies develop, one infection with the hepatitis B virus protects a person from getting it again. Carriers remain infected for life. However, there are different kinds of hepatitis; infection with hepatitis B will not stop a person from getting other types of hepatitis.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There is no specific treatment for acute HBV infection. People who are sick with hepatitis B should see a doctor for advice about how to control their symptoms. 25-40% of adults with chronic HBV infection and liver disease achieve long-term remission after treatment with interferon-alfa.

What can be done if a person comes into contact with someone infected with hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) and hepatitis B vaccine can prevent infection if given within 7 days after an exposure. This treatment is available from doctors in your community. Infants, whose mothers have hepatitis B receive HBIG and begin vaccination at time of birth. Remaining vaccinations should be completed by 6 months of age. Additionally, the baby will have blood tests at 9-12 months to be sure the vaccine has protected them from hepatitis B disease.

How can infection with hepatitis B be prevented?

Never share needles for drug use, ear piercing, tattooing, or any other purpose. Avoid contact with the blood or wound drainage of any other person. Use condoms when having sex.

Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B?

Yes, there is a vaccine to protect against hepatitis B. It is recommended for children, adolescents, and all newborn babies before they leave the hospital (usually within the first 24 hours of birth), and persons who are at high risk for infection or anyone wishing to lower his or her risk of getting hepatitis B. A three dose series will protect the majority of people who are vaccinated.

Information for persons with acute or chronic hepatitis B

What can you do to take care of yourself?

- Avoid alcoholic beverages and street drugs. They will damage your liver.
- Avoid taking prescription or over-the-counter medicines unless your doctor tells you it is OK.
- Eat a healthy diet (low fat) and get enough rest. If you are vomiting after eating tell your doctor.
- See your doctor for a check-up.
- *Persons with acute hepatitis:* Discuss with your doctor about having a blood test (6 months after you first became infected) to see if you have become a carrier of hepatitis B. Carriers may develop serious liver disease in the future and can pass the disease on to others.
- *Women with chronic hepatitis:* Discuss with your doctor about having a blood test every 6-12 months to make sure your liver is healthy and there is not a liver cancer developing. Talk to your doctor about having a special test (called an "ultrasound") done on your liver occasionally.
- If you get pregnant, tell your doctor you have hepatitis B.
- *Women with acute hepatitis:* The baby will need to receive hepatitis B immune globulin and the first dose of the hepatitis B vaccine at birth. The baby will need to complete the vaccine series by 6 months of age and then have post-vaccination testing to assure they are protected.
- *Persons with chronic hepatitis:* It is important that your baby receive hepatitis B immune globulin and the first dose of the hepatitis B vaccine immediately after birth to prevent infection from occurring. The baby will need to complete the vaccine series by 6 months of age and then have post-vaccination testing to assure they are protected.
- Contact the American Liver Foundation for more information (toll-free: 1-800-223-0179).

What can you do to protect others?

- Cover all cuts and sores with a bandage and wash hands well after touching blood or body fluids.
- Throw away any items that have your blood on them, such as bandages and menstrual pads, in plastic bags and close tightly. Wash hands well after touching your blood or body fluids.
- Clean up blood spills with paper towels. Then clean the area with a bleach solution (1 part bleach to 100 parts water, one-quarter cup bleach to a gallon of water).
- Tell your sex partner that you have hepatitis B, use a condom, and encourage your partner to be tested and, vaccinated against hepatitis B.
- Have your sex partners and all those living in your household to see a doctor for testing and for hepatitis B vaccination. Do not allow anyone to come into contact with your blood or body fluids.
- Do not share chewing gum, toothbrushes, razors, scissors, needles for ear piercing, nail files, or anything else that may come in contact with your blood or body fluids.
- Do not share food, drink, cigarettes, lipstick, or lip balm.
- Do not share syringes and needles.
- Do not donate blood, plasma, body organs, sperm, or breast milk.