

Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a disease caused by the hepatitis B virus. It causes inflammation of the liver. The virus is found in the blood and body fluids of an infected person.

What are the health effects of hepatitis B infection?

About 20% of people infected with hepatitis B do not have any symptoms at all.

About 80% of adults infected develop symptoms. It can take up to several months from the time the virus first gets into their system before symptoms become apparent. The symptoms are:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Dark coloured urine and pale coloured bowel motions
- Generally feeling unwell and tired
- Loss of appetite
- Stomach upsets and pains
- Mild fever
- General aches and pains

Most people with hepatitis B can clear the infection from their body and have no further problems. However, about 1 in 20 adults do not clear the infection, which results in chronic (i.e. long term) infection. These people are called 'hepatitis B carriers'. A blood test is the only way to find out whether a person has cleared the infection or has become a carrier.

Hepatitis B carriers may feel well, but they have not cleared the hepatitis virus from their bodies and can infect others for many years or the rest of their lives. Some carriers may eventually clear the virus from their bodies with time. Your doctor can monitor this with blood tests.

Up to 1 in every 4 people who are hepatitis B carriers eventually develop long term liver problems, including ongoing inflammation of the liver and/or cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), and may develop liver cancer.

Children who become infected with hepatitis B are more likely than adults to become carriers and develop long term problems.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread by close contact with the blood, semen, or vaginal fluid of an infected person. If a person is highly infectious it may also be spread through saliva. This means it may be spread by unprotected sexual intercourse, or by sharing needles with an infected person. Tattooing, ear-

piercing or acupuncture using contaminated instruments could also spread hepatitis B. Babies can also get hepatitis B from an infected mother during childbirth.

Children may get hepatitis B when playing with an infected person if blood is exchanged from cuts, grazes or sores. Household contacts are at risk if they share tooth brushes or razors with an infected person.

Hepatitis B is not spread by holding hands, hugging, kissing on the cheek, sneezing or coughing, food or water, or visiting an infected person.

Who is at risk of being infected with hepatitis B?

Your risk is higher if you:

- Are a new baby born to a mother with hepatitis B
- Are an intravenous drug user, especially if you have shared needles
- Have sex with somebody infected with hepatitis B – condoms reduce this risk significantly
- Have multiple sexual partners or are a sex worker
- Live in the same house as an infected person (non-sexual household contacts are at lower risk, but hepatitis B is one of the most infectious viruses, so you should not share personal things such as toothbrushes and razors)
- Work somewhere where you will be handling an infected person's blood.

How can you tell if you have hepatitis B?

By a blood test.

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B. Most people recover after several months but a few develop chronic hepatitis B infection and become a carrier (about 1 in 20 adults). Some hepatitis B carriers benefit from medical therapy. Regular medical follow-up of carriers is very important.

How can people infected with hepatitis B take care of themselves?

- Avoid alcohol until your doctor tells you that you are able to drink. People with hepatitis B do not have a healthy liver, which is necessary for the body to deal with alcohol.
- Eat a healthy diet with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Visit your doctor regularly to be tested for continuing signs of liver inflammation and clearance of the virus.
- Exercise regularly as energy levels allow.
- Ask your doctor about all the medicines you use, including any you buy in shops and healthfood stores. Some herbal remedies are harmful to your liver. Some prescription medicines may also not be suitable for people with liver disease, e.g. oral contraceptives.

- Discuss with your doctor whether you should have the hepatitis A vaccine. Hepatitis A infection can be more severe for people who are hepatitis B carriers.

How can people infected with hepatitis B avoid spreading infection to other people?

- If you become pregnant, inform your Lead Maternity Carer (LMC) that you have hepatitis B. It is very important that the baby is vaccinated at birth against hepatitis B.
- Do not donate blood, tissue or organs
- Do not share needles
- Do not share toothbrushes, razors or any object that could cause bleeding.
- Use condoms. The semen and other body fluids of cases are potentially infectious.
- Cover cuts and abrasions with water-proof dressings. If you have dermatitis or other weeping skin conditions try to avoid spreading ooze from the affected area.
- Inform any professionals who could be exposed to your blood (e.g. dentists, doctors, nurses, lab technicians, tattooists, acupuncturists, etc)
- Consider whether there is any risk that your job may expose other people to your body fluids. If you are a health care worker, it is a good idea to discuss this with Infectious Diseases, Infection Control or Occupational Health.
- Take precautions to prevent spread in contact sport situations. Discuss with your doctor for further information
- Disinfect any surfaces where there has been fresh or dried blood or body fluid spills. Use household bleach (e.g. Janola, No Frills Bleach), which should be diluted to make a 0.1% solution (e.g. if the product is 2% hypochlorite, the active ingredient, mix 50 mls of the bleach with 950 mls of water). The bleach mixture should be left on the surface for half an hour before wiping clean.
- Place any material contaminated with blood or body fluids (including gloves), in a plastic bag for safe disposal.
- Do not share chewing gum or pre-chewed food.

Information for people who have been in contact with someone with hepatitis B

- Have a blood test to see if you have been infected with hepatitis B.
- If you have not been infected, get vaccinated with the hepatitis B vaccine. Household contacts and sexual partners of people with hepatitis B can have the vaccine for free from their GP. Immunisation is also free for all children under the age of 18. For others, contact your family doctor to find out about the cost.

Immunisation

- There is a very effective vaccine available to protect against hepatitis B.
- The vaccine involves having three separate injections over a six month period (unless an accelerated course is recommended). It is important to have all three doses of the vaccine.
- After 3 doses of the vaccine, 95% of children and 80-90% of adults become immune. This means that they will not catch hepatitis B. However, people should still be careful when coming into contact with blood and other body fluids as the hepatitis B vaccine does not protect against other illnesses such as HIV and hepatitis C.
- All children born in New Zealand since 1988 should have had the hepatitis B vaccine as part of their routine childhood immunisations.
- The vaccine is free for all children aged under 18 years. It is also free for all household contacts and sexual partners of people with hepatitis B. For others, contact your family doctor to find out about the cost.
- A baby born to a mother with hepatitis B needs four immunisation doses starting as soon as the baby is born, plus a follow-up blood test after the last dose. Otherwise the baby has a high risk of becoming infected with hepatitis B at birth. Pregnant women should ask their Lead Maternity Carer (LMC) about this.
- People in high risk jobs (e.g. health care workers, some institutional settings and sex workers), are advised to consider immunisation, but it is not free unless funded by your employer.
- The vaccine is very safe. The most common side effect is redness and swelling around the injection site. Sometimes people may have a mild fever afterwards.

For general advice please contact Healthline on 0800 611 116

For further information contact the Auckland Regional Public Health Service on 09 623 4600

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