



Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a viral infection that attacks the liver and can cause both acute and chronic disease. The acute illness causes liver inflammation, vomiting, jaundice and rarely, death. Chronic hepatitis B may eventually cause liver cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer.

Worldwide, an estimated two billion people have been infected with the hepatitis B virus and more than 350 million have chronic liver infection.

How does hepatitis B spread?

The hepatitis B virus is found in the blood and the semen or vaginal fluids of an infected person. You can get the hepatitis B virus when an infected person's blood or body fluids enter your body through cracks and cuts in your skin, through mucous membranes, or directly into your blood stream. The hepatitis B virus can also pass from a hepatitis B carrier mother to her infant during childbirth.

The chances of becoming infected depend on the amount of virus present in the blood or body fluids, but overall, the virus is very infectious. The hepatitis B virus can survive outside the body for at least 7 days. During that time, it can still cause infection if it enters the body of a person who is not infected.

Who can get hepatitis B?

Anyone who comes in direct contact with or has frequent exposure to blood or body fluids is at risk of becoming infected with the hepatitis B virus. People considered at high risk for this infection include:

- People who work in jobs where they are exposed to blood or body fluids, such as health care providers/workers, embalmers, and emergency workers
- People who have unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex
- People with multiple sexual partners or who have recently had a sexually transmitted infection
- Drug users who share drug related equipment
- Those who have received blood or blood products prior to 1979 in Canada
- Household and sexual contacts of people who carry the hepatitis B virus
- People from areas where hepatitis B is very common
- People who travel to countries with high rates of hepatitis B
- Anyone getting electrolysis, acupuncture, body piercing or tattooing
- Recipients of solid organ transplantation

For further information, please call:
York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653
TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit www.york.ca

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Only 50 percent of people who are infected by the hepatitis B virus have symptoms. People with an acute infection may feel generally unwell, experience loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, pain or tenderness in the right upper part of the abdomen (where the liver is located), body aches, mild fever, dark urine, and then progress to the development of jaundice. Chronic infection with hepatitis B may be associated with a chronic inflammation of the liver leading to cirrhosis over a period of several years.

The time between exposure to the hepatitis B virus and development of symptoms is 45 to 160 days.

Ninety percent of people with a new acute hepatitis B infection recover completely from the disease. One percent can die from a severe acute case. Nine percent of cases go on to carry the virus for the rest of their lives (chronic hepatitis B carriers). They may not be aware that they carry the virus and may unknowingly infect others.

Is there a test to show I have had hepatitis B?

A blood test can be done six weeks or more after a possible exposure to tell if you have been infected. It can take up to four months to show positive results. Antibodies to hepatitis B virus will show up on the test six months after exposure if immunity is the result. If you still have the virus in your body after six months and antibodies do not develop, then your health care provider will advise you that you are a carrier.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

Acute hepatitis B infection does not usually require treatment because most adults clear the infection spontaneously. Treatment of chronic infection may be necessary to reduce the risk of cirrhosis and liver cancer.

How can it be prevented?

Vaccination

There are two safe and effective vaccines available in Ontario to prevent infection with the hepatitis B virus. Hepatitis B vaccine is free to all grade seven students and to certain high-risk groups. York Region Community and Health Services can tell you who is eligible for free vaccine. For grade seven students, the vaccine is given in two doses at least six months apart. For all others, the vaccine is given in three doses: the first dose now, the second dose in one month, and the third dose in six months.

The risk to the newborn can be significantly reduced by administering hepatitis B vaccine and hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) within 12 hours of birth, followed by a second dose of hepatitis B vaccine at 1 to 2 months and a third dose at and no earlier than 6 months.

People infected with hepatitis B can be assessed by a health care provider for hepatitis A and receive free hepatitis A vaccine from York Region Community and Health Services.

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Hepatitis B Immune Globulin (HBIG)

Following an assessment by your health care provider, HBIG may be offered if someone has had a needle stick injury or any other high-risk exposure. It should be given within 48 hours of the exposure.

To prevent the spread of the hepatitis B virus:

- Treat all blood and body fluids as potentially infectious. You cannot tell who is infected by looking at the person
- Disinfect the surface on any non-disposable equipment that has been in contact with body fluids to kill the hepatitis B virus. Use a solution of one part bleach to nine parts water and leave it on the contaminated surface for at least 10 minutes
- Tell your sexual partner(s) if you are infectious. Protect them by using latex condoms during sexual intercourse. Inform your partner(s) to get tested for hepatitis B. Free hepatitis B vaccine is available for sexual partners and household contacts of a person with hepatitis B
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, nail scissors, nail clippers and nail files
- Do not share needles and other drug related equipment
- If you are infected with the hepatitis B virus, do not donate blood, blood products, organ tissue and semen to others

Hepatitis B is a reportable disease. York Region Community and Health Services must be notified so appropriate case and contact follow up can be done.

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