

# 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 can cause liver inflammation, vomiting, jaundice and in rare cases, death. Chronic hepatitis B can eventually cause liver cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer.

An estimated two billion people worldwide have been infected with the hepatitis B virus and more than 350 million have chronic hepatitis B infection.

### Symptoms

Only 50 per cent of people who are infected by the hepatitis B virus have symptoms. People with an acute infection may feel unwell and have 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 and dark urine. Illness may progress to developing jaundice. Chronic infection may be associated with a chronic inflammation of the liver leading to cirrhosis.

Symptoms develop between 45 to 160 days after exposure to the hepatitis B virus. Ninety per cent of people with acute hepatitis B infection recover completely, nine per cent of cases go on to carry the virus for the rest of their lives and one per cent die from a severe acute case. Chronic hepatitis B carriers may not be aware that they carry the virus and may unknowingly infect others.

### How it spreads

The hepatitis B virus is found in the blood and body fluids such as 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, mucous membranes, or directly into your blood stream.

Hepatitis B can also pass through unprotected sex, or from an infected mother to her infant during pregnancy and childbirth. The virus is very infectious and can survive outside the body for at least seven days. During that time, it can cause infection if it enters the body of a person who is not infected.

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 oral, anal or vaginal sex
- People with multiple sexual partners or who have recently had a sexually transmitted infection
- Drug users who share injecting/non-injecting 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



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- People who travel to countries with high rates of hepatitis B
- Anyone receiving salon services including pedicures, manicures, electrolysis, acupuncture, body piercing or tattooing, if equipment is not properly cleaned and disinfected
- Recipients of organ transplantation

## Diagnosis

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 have the virus after six months and antibodies do not develop, you are a chronic hepatitis B carrier.

## Treatment

Acute hepatitis B infection does not usually require treatment because most adults clear the infection spontaneously. There is no cure for chronic hepatitis B but treatment of chronic infection may be necessary to reduce the risk of cirrhosis and liver cancer.

## Take care of yourself:

- See your health care provider regularly for followup. Chronic hepatitis B can lead to liver disease and/or liver cancer.
- Get checked for hepatitis A and get vaccinated if needed.
- Avoid alcohol use.
- Eat a balanced diet and exercise. People who are overweight or obese have a higher risk of developing fatty liver disease.
- Tell your health care provider if you are considering taking vitamins or herbal supplements, these can cause damage if taken in high doses.

## Protection

Be sure to treat all blood and body fluids as potentially infectious. Disinfect any non-disposable equipment that has been in contact with body fluids. Apply a solution of one-part bleach mixed with nine parts water, and leave it on the contaminated surface for at least ten minutes.

Drug users should not share their needles, spoons and other drug-related equipment with others.

People who carry the hepatitis B virus can do the following to prevent spreading it to others:

- Inform your sexual partners. Practice safer sex by using condoms from beginning to end of all oral, anal or vaginal sex.
- Do not donate blood, blood products, organ tissues and semen.
- Do not share personal hygiene items such as razor blades, toothbrushes, nail clippers, etc.
- Patients with diabetes should not share their glucometer and related equipment with others
- Keep cuts and lesions covered.
- Inform your health care providers that you have hepatitis B.

## Vaccination

The hepatitis B vaccine is free to all grade seven students and to certain high-risk groups (e.g. sexual partners and household contacts of a person with hepatitis B).

Children between the ages of 11 and 15 receive two doses, for all others, the vaccine is given in three doses. The risk to an infant born to a mother who is a hepatitis B carrier can be significantly reduced by administering hepatitis B vaccine and hepatitis B immune globulin within 12 hours of birth followed by a second dose of hepatitis B vaccine at one month and a third dose at six months. The infant should have a blood test at seven to 12 months of age to check for immunity to hepatitis B.

People infected with hepatitis B can be assessed by a health care provider for hepatitis A. If hepatitis A vaccine is recommended, your health care provider can obtain free hepatitis A vaccine from York Region Community and Health Services.

## 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.

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

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