

# HEPATITIS B INFORMATION

## What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a disease of the liver caused by a virus (germ). It may cause no symptoms at all or only very mild illness in some people, especially young children. The illness usually lasts 2-3 weeks but it takes some people several months to get better. In others, hepatitis B can be severe enough to cause death.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may appear 50 to 180 days after the virus enters the body. Symptoms often appear slowly and may include:

- tiredness
- nausea and/or vomiting
- dark coloured urine
- yellowing of the eyes and skin
- poor appetite
- abdominal pain
- light coloured stools
- joint pain

## How is hepatitis B treated?

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B. Most people recover from acute hepatitis B infection within 6 months and are protected from getting the disease again. However, some people who have been infected with hepatitis B recover from the acute illness and feel well, but do not get rid of the virus. These people develop chronic and are sometimes called “**carriers**” because they carry the virus for a long time - usually the rest of their lives. A blood test done 3 to 6 months after the onset of illness will tell whether or not the virus is still present.

A person is more likely to develop chronic hepatitis if they are in poor health, have a weak immune system or are very young at the time of the infection. For example, 9 out of 10 infants (compared to only 1 in 10 adults) who get hepatitis B disease develop chronic hepatitis.

Most people with chronic hepatitis will have no symptoms but may be at risk for other liver diseases later in life. As many as 1 out of 4 may develop liver failure, cirrhosis or liver cancer 15 to 30 years after the infection. While a few treatment options exist for severe cases of chronic hepatitis B, they are complex and require referral to a specialist.

Persons who have the hepatitis B virus should have regular follow-up with a doctor and follow a healthy lifestyle:

- eat a well balanced diet
- get plenty of rest
- avoid alcohol and drugs

Regular follow-up is important to check the health of the liver. Following a healthy lifestyle can help to reduce stress on the liver.

## How is hepatitis B spread?

The hepatitis B virus is spread through direct contact with body fluids of people who have the virus. This virus is found in blood, semen, vaginal fluids and, very rarely, saliva. If blood or any body fluids containing blood are in direct contact with mucous membranes or openings in the skin such as fresh cuts, infection can occur.

## Who is at risk of coming in contact with hepatitis B?

People who have direct contact with blood or body fluids infected with the hepatitis B virus are at risk of becoming infected with the hepatitis B virus. Examples of direct contact are:

- Sharing needles with a person who has the virus (including needles used for drugs, body piercing, tattooing, electrolysis and acupuncture).
- Unprotected sexual contact with a person who has the virus.
- Sharing personal articles such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers or earrings with a person who has the virus.
- The birth process. If a pregnant woman has the virus, it can pass to the baby during labour and delivery.

Family members living in the same household as someone who has hepatitis B have an increased risk of direct contact with the hepatitis B virus.

People who travel may be at risk for getting hepatitis B if they receive medical or dental procedures in developing countries.

## What should you do if you or your partner is pregnant?

Be sure your doctor is aware that you or someone in your household has hepatitis B. Your doctor can arrange for your baby to receive protection at birth. This may include an injection of hepatitis B immune globulin and the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine. The baby will need two more doses of vaccine to have lasting protection. These are given at the local Public Health Centre with routine childhood immunizations.

A blood test for the baby should be done no sooner than one month after completing the vaccine series to check if the baby has developed protection against the hepatitis B virus.

## How can people with hepatitis B prevent spreading the virus to others?

- DO -** make sure household contacts and sexual partners are protected. A blood test must be done to determine if they need hepatitis B vaccine to protect them from the disease. Using a condom or avoiding sexual intercourse can also protect sexual partners.
- DO -** clean up blood spills carefully. Bleach will kill this virus. Use a fresh solution of 1 part bleach mixed with 9 parts of water to clean up blood spills. Wash hands well after cleaning. Throw away tissues or menstrual pads where no one else will handle them.
- DO -** throw away needles or razor blades carefully by placing them into approved puncture resistant containers. Check with a local pharmacy for information on containers and their disposal.
- DO -** tell your healthcare worker (e.g. doctor, dentist, nurse) that you have hepatitis B.
- DO NOT -** share toothbrushes, earrings or razors. Even very small amounts of blood on these articles can contain this virus and spread the disease to others who share them.
- DO NOT -** share needles of any kind (body piercing, tattoo, electrolysis and acupuncture).
- DO NOT -** share intravenous injection needles or non-injection drug use equipment.
- DO NOT -** throw sharps (e.g. needles, razor blades) into the regular garbage.
- DO NOT -** donate blood, organs or semen.

## What happens when someone is in direct contact with the hepatitis B virus?

Hepatitis B immune globulin and/or hepatitis B vaccine may be given to provide protection against hepatitis B. Not everyone who has been in contact with hepatitis B needs this kind of protection.

For health advice and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call **Health Link Alberta** at 780-408-LINK (5465) or outside the local calling area, call toll-free 1-866-408-LINK. Visit [www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca) for health information online.