

## Combined Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B Vaccine Information Sheet

### What is hepatitis A?

Hepatitis A disease is an infection of the liver caused by a virus. Hepatitis A disease occurs in Canada and all over the world. It is very common, or endemic, in many parts of the world.

Most people who get hepatitis A disease recover in about one month but sometimes it can take 6 to 12 months to get better. In rare cases, the illness can be severe enough to cause death. Persons with a history of chronic liver disease are more likely to have severe illness. Once a person has recovered from hepatitis A disease they are protected from getting the infection again.

### How is hepatitis A spread?

Hepatitis A virus is most commonly found in the stool of the infected person. It is spread through contaminated food or water. Thorough hand washing after using the bathroom or changing diapers and before handling food can prevent the spread of hepatitis A (fecal-oral route).

### How can hepatitis A be prevented?

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A. Combined hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccine, however, is very effective in preventing infection. The series consists of three injections given over a period of 6 months. After completing the vaccine series, protection against hepatitis A is expected to last for at least 20 years.

### What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious infection that affects the liver. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus. In some parts of the world such as Asia, Africa, the Pacific Islands, Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and parts of South America, hepatitis B disease is very common.

People who get hepatitis B disease can have a mild illness that lasts a few weeks, or can have more severe disease leading to death; others can have a serious lifelong illness (chronic infection). The risk of developing chronic infection is greater the younger the person is when they are infected with the hepatitis B virus. Chronic hepatitis B infection can cause permanent liver damage and scarring, or liver cancer later in life.

### How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B virus is found in blood and some body fluids (e.g., semen, vaginal fluid and saliva) of an infected person. The hepatitis B virus can be spread through sexual contact with an infected person; through sharing contaminated needles and equipment used for tattooing, body piercing, acupuncture or injecting drugs; through sharing personal care items such as razors, scissors, nail clippers or toothbrushes; by touching open cuts or sores of an infected person; through bites, needle stick injuries and sexual assault as a result of exposure to blood and body fluids of an infected person; or to an infant at birth from an infected mother.

People with chronic hepatitis B infection can spread the hepatitis B virus to other people even though they do not feel sick.

### How can hepatitis B be prevented?

Hepatitis B vaccine is effective in preventing hepatitis B infection before any possible exposure. Other ways to prevent hepatitis B infection include avoiding high risk activities such as: having unprotected sex; sharing equipment used for tattooing, body piercing, acupuncture and or injecting drugs; sharing personal care items such as razors, scissors, nail clippers or toothbrushes.

## **What are the symptoms of hepatitis A and B?**

The symptoms of hepatitis A and B can vary from person to person. Symptoms of hepatitis A most often appear in people not immune to hepatitis A about 1 month after coming in contact with the virus and for hepatitis B about 2 to 3 months after coming in contact with the virus. Some people, especially young children, may get hepatitis A and B infection without noticing any symptoms. The symptoms appear slowly and may include:

- tiredness
- poor appetite
- nausea and vomiting
- abdominal pain
- fever
- dark coloured urine (tea-coloured), pale, light coloured stools
- yellowing of eyes and skin (jaundice)

## **Is the vaccine safe?**

Yes. In Canada, vaccines must undergo laboratory and field testing. They must pass a strict licensing procedure with the federal government before they can be used. Once the vaccine has been approved for use, every lot is tested for safety and quality. A person cannot get either hepatitis A or hepatitis B disease from the vaccine that is used in Alberta and Canada.

## **Who should get the vaccine?**

People 1 year of age and older who are eligible for both hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccine include:

- those with chronic liver disease
- those with lifestyle risks for getting both the hepatitis A and the hepatitis B viruses
- those with haemophilia A or B receiving plasma-derived replacement clotting factors

## **Who should not get the vaccine?**

Combined hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccine should not be given to:

- those who have a history of severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to any hepatitis A or hepatitis B containing vaccine
- those who have had a severe reaction to this vaccine or any component of the vaccine
- children younger than 1 year of age
- people with certain medical conditions as they may need a higher strength hepatitis B vaccine

## **What are the possible side effects to the vaccine?**

Most people have little or no reaction to this vaccine. Reactions that do occur are usually mild, such as redness, tenderness or swelling where the needle was given. Occasionally, headache and mild fever may occur. Reactions usually disappear in 24 to 48 hours.

As with any immunization, unexpected or unusual side effects can happen. This includes severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

## **What should you do if you have a reaction to the vaccine?**

- Apply a cool moist cloth to the area where the needle was given to reduce the pain and swelling
- Take a medication such as acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol®) to reduce the pain, fever or discomfort.
  - Aspirin® (ASA) is not recommended for individuals under 19 years of age.
- Report any unusual reactions to Health Link Alberta

For health advice and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call **Health Link Alberta** at:

- 403-943-5465 in Calgary
- 780-408-5465 in Edmonton
- Toll free 1-866-408-5465 elsewhere in Alberta

Or visit [www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca](http://www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca) for information online.

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