

Fact Sheet

Hepatitis B (hep B)



Hepatitis B (hep B) is an infectious virus that can cause serious disease of the liver (hepatitis means liver inflammation). The liver is part of the body's digestive system and performs lots of functions essential to health such as digesting fats and filtering toxins. When your liver isn't working properly you can feel very unwell.

How do you get it?

Hepatitis B can be transferred from one person to another through body fluids like blood, semen, vaginal fluid and saliva. It can be passed on through:

- unprotected oral, anal or vaginal sex (sex without a condom) with a person who has hepatitis B
- sharing toothbrushes, razors, needles or injecting equipment with a person who has hepatitis B
- getting a tattoo painted with ink from an inkpot that has been used to tattoo someone else (you should only get tattoos and piercings done at professional parlours)
- contact sports where there are cuts and grazes
- healthcare workers may sometimes be exposed if they receive a needle-stick injury or if they are splashed with blood from an infected person.

Any other ways you can get it?

A pregnant woman can pass on hepatitis B to her baby before it is born. Some people now living in Australia who grew up in another country acquired hepatitis B from vaccinations in childhood where one needle was used for a lot of people. Hepatitis B is not transmitted by casual contact such as hugging or holding hands, kissing on the cheek, coughing or sneezing, sharing food or sharing eating utensils.

What are the symptoms?

About half of people infected with hepatitis B don't have any symptoms. They can pass it on without ever knowing that they are infected. Some of the symptoms of hepatitis B are:

- fever and extreme tiredness
- abdominal pain
- dark urine or pale faeces
- yellow skin (jaundice)
- poor appetite
- nausea and/or vomiting.

A very small percentage of people can get very sick, very suddenly. They can feel very tired, have yellow skin (jaundice) and a swollen abdomen. They need to be treated by a doctor immediately.

What if I'm pregnant? Will it affect the baby?

Hepatitis B can be passed on to babies, usually during childbirth, and the virus can also cause problems for the mother during pregnancy, depending on how sick she is. It's important to be tested for hepatitis B when you are pregnant so that the doctor can work out how to best look after you and the baby. It is also possible to be immunised against hepatitis B when you are pregnant, although this is not routinely recommended.

How can I prevent it?

- The best way to protect yourself against hepatitis B is by getting vaccinated. The vaccine is given by needle, usually in three doses over six months, although sometimes these can be given over a shorter period of time if necessary.
- Practice safe sex; check out our male condom and female condom factsheets for tips on how to use condoms correctly.
- Never share needles, syringes or other injecting equipment.
- Don't share personal items such as razors and toothbrushes.
- Make sure that equipment used for tattooing, acupuncture and body piercing is sterile.
- Be blood aware. When playing sports, wash blood off yourself, and if someone else has blood on them, wear gloves to help them or ask them to wash the blood off themselves.

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If you are not immune to hepatitis B and you are exposed to the virus, there is an injectable antibody called hepatitis B immunoglobulin that can reduce the likelihood of you becoming infected. It is ideally given within 72 hours of being exposed to the virus, but may be of benefit up to 14 days afterwards. A course of hepatitis B vaccines can also be given at the same time. If you have done anything that might put you at risk seek immediate medical advice.

What happens in a hepatitis B test?

The test for hepatitis B is a blood test. This means the doctor or nurse will take a sample of your blood to see if you have the virus or if you can pass it on to anyone else. To find out where you can go for a sexual health check call the Family Planning NSW Talkline on 1300 65 88 86. Your conversation with our expert nurse is confidential and anonymous.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for hepatitis B, but most people's immune systems get rid of the infection on their own; 95% of people with the infection make a full recovery. You might need to be careful about what you eat and stop drinking alcohol. Your doctor can give you advice about this. About 5% of people can't get rid of the virus and may go on to develop serious health problems. These people are called 'carriers' and might still be able to pass the infection on to other people. There is anti-viral treatment available which can reduce the risk of developing severe liver problems, such as liver cirrhosis (scarring) and liver cancer. Speak to your doctor about where you can be referred for this treatment.

Do I need to tell anyone else if I have hepatitis B?

It is important to tell people who may have been exposed that you have hepatitis B so that they can also be tested. If you are infectious and you have had unprotected sex or shared needles with someone who is not immune they need to see a doctor immediately in case they need immunoglobulin. Your doctor can help you decide who may be at risk and help you to contact them. You should not have sex until your doctor has advised you that it is safe to do so. It is recommended that all members of your household, as well as your sexual partners, should be vaccinated against hepatitis B.

Hepatitis B is a notifiable disease. This means that laboratory staff are legally required to tell NSW Health about new cases. This information is confidential and is used for public health planning and to prevent further spread.

For more information

- Contact the Family Planning NSW Talkline on 1300 658 886 or go to www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline
- National Relay Service 133 677
- Visit your nearest Family Planning NSW clinic (www.fpnsw.org.au/clinics) or your local GP
- Hepatitis NSW infoline 1800 803 990 or www.hep.org.au
- Gastroenterological Society of Australia www.gesa.org.au

References

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