

HEPATITIS B

WHAT IS HEPATITIS B?

Hepatitis means inflammation (swelling and pain) of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by drinking large amounts of alcohol, taking drugs or medications that cause inflammation to the liver or by becoming infected with a particular virus.

The different types of viruses that cause hepatitis are known by different letters: hepatitis A, B, C, D and E and are sometimes shortened to hep A, hep B and hep C etc.

In Australia 400 cases of newly acquired hepatitis B virus are reported each year. Approximately 1 out of every 100 Australians carries the hepatitis B virus.

HOW DO YOU GET HEPATITIS B?

The hepatitis B virus is found in blood and to a lesser degree other bodily fluids such as semen, vaginal secretions and saliva. You can get hepatitis B when the blood or body fluids of an infected person enters your blood stream or body, this can occur through the following activities.

- Mother to child: from a hepatitis B infected mother to her baby during pregnancy and delivery
- Unsafe sex (not wearing condoms)
- Sharing equipment used for injecting drug use
- Skin piercing and tattoos with equipment that is not cleaned and sterilized properly
- Sharing razor blades or toothbrushes with someone who is infected with the virus
- The blood from a hepatitis B infected person coming into contact with an open cut or wound of a person who is not infected with hepatitis B

All blood and blood products produced for medical purposes in Australia are carefully screened for HBV and other blood-borne viruses.

The risk of getting infected with hepatitis B from a blood transfusion is extremely low (approximately 1 in 739,000 - see www.Transfusion.com.au for further information).

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS B?

Many people who become infected with hepatitis B do not become very ill and show little if any signs of infection. Children are less likely to have symptoms than adults. If symptoms are present they often last only a few weeks and may include loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting and tiredness.

In more severe cases additional symptoms of pain in the liver, fever, pain in the joints and yellowing of the eyes and skin known as jaundice can occur.

Most adults who are infected with hepatitis B completely recover and do not become infected again. However a few people become very ill and some may even die as a result of the infection.

LONG TERM HEPATITIS B

A small proportion of people who become infected with the hepatitis B virus develop long term hepatitis B infection, otherwise known as chronic infection. Long term infection means the virus stays in the blood-stream for a person's entire life.

A person with long term hepatitis B may 'carry' (and transmit) the virus for life without showing any signs or symptoms and may not know they have it. Chronic infection increases the risk of a person becoming unwell and developing illnesses such as chronic liver disease or cancer in later life.

Babies and children infected with hepatitis B are more likely to develop long term infection than adults. As a consequence hepatitis B occurs more commonly in some population groups where mothers have high rates of hepatitis B and transmission of the virus occurs during pregnancy, child birth or soon after birth. Babies born to hepatitis B positive mothers can be protected from the disease if immunized soon after birth.

This fact sheet is designed to provide you with information on Hepatitis B. It is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with your doctor. All clients are strongly advised to check with their doctor about any specific questions or concerns they may have. Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this pamphlet is correct at the time of printing.

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HOW DO YOU TEST FOR HEPATITIS B?

A blood test can be performed to determine if you have been infected with hepatitis B and in some cases a follow up blood test may be required before a result can be confirmed.

HOW DO YOU PREVENT GETTING HEPATITIS B?

- Immunisation is the best protection against hepatitis B and is recommended for all babies, adolescents and those in high risk groups. (see more information under immunisation)

- Use condoms practicing safe sex every time you have anal or vaginal sex.

- Avoid oral sex if you or your partner has herpes, ulcers or bleeding gums. The risk of becoming infected with hepatitis B from oral sex is low unless blood is present.

- Never share needles, syringes and other injecting equipment such as spoons, swabs or water if you are injecting drugs. Always use sterile needles and syringes which are available through Needle and Syringe programs and some chemists and always wash your hands before and after injecting.

- Wear gloves if providing first aid or cleaning up blood or bodily fluids

IMMUNISATION INFORMATION

For adults a full course of hepatitis B vaccination consists of 3 doses over six months. All 3 doses are required to give 90% protection.

Immunisation for hepatitis B is recommended and available for in Victoria on the National Immunisation Program Schedule for the following groups

- All babies
- Children born after 1st May 2000 who have not received a course of hepatitis B vaccine

- Children in year 7 via a school based program who have not received a course of hepatitis B vaccine
- 'Catch-up' for adolescents in secondary school who missed the Year 7 hepatitis B course and are over 15 years of age
- Injecting drug users
- Prisoners

People from the following groups are also recommended to be vaccinated against hepatitis B, however payment is required.

- Men who have sex with men
- Have a sexual partner with hepatitis B
- Live in a house with someone who has hepatitis B
- Have a chronic liver disease and / or hepatitis C
- Have kidney dialysis
- HIV-positive people and other immunosuppressed adults
- Receive blood products
- Are a resident or staff member at a facility for people with intellectual disabilities
- People adopting children from overseas
- Health-care workers, dentists, embalmers, tattooists and body-pierces

Possible side effects of hepatitis B vaccination: Most side effects are minor and quickly disappear.

The following reactions are not common, and if they occur, will happen soon after the immunisation:

- Low grade fever
- Soreness, redness and swelling in the area where the injection was given
- Nausea
- Feeling unwell
- Joint pain.

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WHAT IF YOU'VE BEEN EXPOSED TO HEPATITIS B?

See your doctor immediately. In some instances your Doctor may be able to give you treatment which greatly reduces the risk of you becoming infected.

WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE FOR HEPATITIS B?

If your body 'clears' the virus itself you will require no further treatment. If however you develop long term hepatitis B you should discuss treatment options and life style changes, such as limiting alcohol intake and eating a low fat well balanced diet with your doctor.

Medications can be given to try and clear the virus and to reduce liver damage. These medications are called interferons and antivirals, some of which are covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) Your doctor may also refer you to a liver specialist and regularly monitor your health

WHERE CAN YOU GET FURTHER HELP AND INFORMATION ON HEPATITIS B?

- Your local doctor
- Communicable Disease Control Section
(Public Health Branch)
Department of Human Services
Telephone: 1300 651 160
Web: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas/diseases/hepb>
- The Australian Hepatitis Council
1st Floor
4 Irving Street
PHILLIP ACT 2606
Telephone: 02 6232 4257
Web: www.hepatitisaustralia.com
- DirectLine – for information about where to get clean needles and syringes for drug users.
Telephone: 1800 888 236

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