



Hepatitis B



What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious infection of the liver and is caused by the hepatitis B virus. Hepatitis B is one of the most common strains of viral hepatitis (other common strains being hepatitis A virus and hepatitis C virus).

What are the symptoms?

Some people with hepatitis B have no symptoms and may infect others without knowing. Many people who become infected with hepatitis B never feel sick and recover completely. Others get a brief, acute illness and often become tired, feverish, lose their appetite, suffer from vomiting and diarrhea, and sometimes get jaundice (yellowing of the skin).

What is a hepatitis B carrier?

Anyone who is chronically infected with hepatitis B virus is called a "carrier" of the virus. The risk is greatest for infants born to mothers who are hepatitis B carriers. Without immediate vaccinations, approximately 90% of these babies will develop chronic hepatitis B infection. Hepatitis B carriers have not developed immunity as a result of infection and may have traces of the hepatitis B virus in their blood and

body fluids for the rest of their lives. At times there may be ongoing liver damage and at other times infection may be inactive. Most carriers appear healthy and symptom free, but some will develop chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis or liver cancer years after becoming infected with hepatitis B virus.

How is the hepatitis B virus spread?

A person who has acute hepatitis B or who is a carrier can spread hepatitis B virus to other people through his/her blood and other body fluids or by sexual contact. In Canada, hepatitis B is spread mainly through unprotected sexual contact. The virus can also be spread by sharing needles, by body and ear piercing, by tattooing and by being stuck with a used needle on the job. An infected mother can pass the virus to the baby during birth. Rarely, hepatitis B can be spread by a bite from an infected person. Hepatitis B is not spread by water, food or by casual contacts that occur at schools or workplaces.

As a carrier, what should you do to prevent passing the virus to others?

- Practise safe sex: use condoms!

Encourage your sex partner(s) and all people who live with you to get hepatitis B testing. If they have not already been infected, they should be vaccinated against hepatitis B.

- If you are pregnant, or planning to have children, there is a high risk of passing the virus to your baby around the time of birth. Your baby may develop chronic hepatitis B. However, the baby can be protected through immunization. At birth, your baby will receive hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) and the first of three doses of the hepatitis B vaccine. The second dose is given when the baby is one month old and the third at six months old. This gives your baby a 95% chance of not being infected with hepatitis B. Although hepatitis B screening is part of the prenatal testing in some provinces, be sure to discuss this matter with your family doctor or obstetrician.
- Tell your doctor, dentist and other health care providers that you are a carrier so that they can take necessary precautions.
- Never share your toothbrush, razor, nail file or other personal items that might contain traces of blood.
- Get rid of articles contaminated with your blood (e.g., tampons, dental floss, bandages, needles, broken glass)

by placing them in a protective container.

- Never donate blood or semen.
- Cover all cuts and sores with bandages. Avoid swimming in public pools if you have open cuts and sores.
- Clean up spills of your blood with freshly diluted household bleach (one part bleach, nine parts water) and let it stand for 10 minutes before wiping it away. The bleach will kill any hepatitis B virus left on the surface.
- Refrain from preparing food if you have bleeding cuts or sores on your hands.

Who is at risk of getting hepatitis B?

Without immunization, various people are at risk of infection:

- Babies born to mothers who are hepatitis B carriers.
- Other people living in the same household as a carrier.
- Sexual partners of carriers.
- Anyone whose occupation involves increased exposure to blood and body fluids (e.g., health care workers, law enforcement officers, firefighters, etc.).
- Injection drug users.
- People in parts of the world where hepatitis B is relatively common, such as Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, southern and eastern Europe, and the Pacific islands.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

Diagnosis is made through blood tests.

Is hepatitis B a preventable disease?

Yes! Hepatitis B can be prevented by:

- Adopting safe sex practices.
- Active immunization with a hepatitis B vaccine. Three injections of this vaccine within a six month period provide long-lasting protection against hepatitis B in the majority of people.
- Administering hepatitis B immune globulin to anyone who has had recent contact (seven days or less) with infected blood or body fluids.
- Screening all pregnant women and immunizing babies born to mothers who are hepatitis B carriers.

Is there treatment for hepatitis B?

Yes. Some people who are seriously ill may be given a medication to help fight the virus. However, most people either improve or get well without medication. About 1% of infected people die.

How can I get free hepatitis B vaccine?

Hepatitis B vaccine is provided free for Grade 7 students and given at school by Health Unit nurses. The program is run

annually and information is sent home to parents of Grade 7 students at the beginning of that school year. This is not a required vaccine, but is highly recommended.

It is also provided free for intravenous drug users, persons with Hepatitis C, persons having multiple sex partners (more than one in six months), men who have sex with men, household and sexual contacts of acute cases and chronic carriers, infants born to infected mothers, persons awaiting liver transplant, hemophiliacs and others receiving repeated infusions of blood or blood products, persons on renal dialysis, and children less than seven years old whose families have immigrated from counties with a high prevalence of hepatitis B.

For more information, please contact a member of Haldimand-Norfolk Health Unit's Infectious Disease Team.

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