

Hepatitis B - immunisation

Hepatitis B is a virus that affects the liver. Most adults who catch hepatitis B recover completely and do not require ongoing treatment. However, children with hepatitis B are more likely to develop liver disease or cancer in later life. All children and adults at increased risk should be immunised against hepatitis B.

In Victoria, the hepatitis B vaccine is offered free of charge to all infants born after May 2000, as well as to all Year 7 school students if they have not already been immunised.

Serious side effects or allergic reactions to the vaccine are rare. If you are concerned about your reaction or your child's reaction to any vaccine, see your doctor immediately.

Hepatitis B can be spread from mother to baby

Mothers who have long-term hepatitis B sometimes pass the virus to their children either through the womb (rarely) or at the time of birth. However, most infection occurs shortly after birth so if the newborn baby is quickly immunised, they can be protected from the disease. Hepatitis B virus can also be spread through exposure of broken skin or mucous membranes to the blood or other body fluids of an infected person.

Immunisation can prevent problems later in life

Some people who are infected with hepatitis B do not become very ill and some do not become sick at all. Children are less likely to have symptoms than adults when infected.

A small proportion of people who become infected with the hepatitis B virus develop a long-term hepatitis B infection. A person with long-term hepatitis B may be at risk of developing illnesses such as chronic liver disease or liver cancer later in life.

Babies and children who are infected are more likely than adults to develop long-term hepatitis B. A child who contracts long-term hepatitis B has an increased risk of developing liver disease and cancer later in life.

The vaccine

The current Australia-wide immunisation program started in 1998 for adolescents and in 2000 for newborn infants. It aims to protect all children from hepatitis B infection. This is necessary because there has been an increase in the number of people who are infected with, or carry, hepatitis B.

A full course of hepatitis B injections must be given before a child is protected. It is recommended that this course of immunisation begins at birth.

The adult course involves three doses of the vaccine over six months and gives protection to about 95 per cent of people. Once you have had the three doses, you can have a blood test to see if you are protected.

Immunisation for children and high-risk groups

Immunisation is the best protection against hepatitis B infection and is recommended for all infants and young children, adolescents and those in high-risk groups.

In Victoria, the vaccine is offered free of charge for all children:

- **All babies** – shortly after birth.

- **Two, four and six months** – as part of a combined vaccine against other diseases.
- **Year 7 secondary school students** – receive two injections, four to six months apart, if they have not already been vaccinated.

Immunisation is also recommended and available free of charge in Victoria for:

- All people who live in a household with someone who has hepatitis B
- Injecting drug users
- People living with HIV.

Other people who should be immunised

In addition to those groups listed above, immunisation is also especially recommended if you:

- Have a sexual partner who has hepatitis B
- Are male and have sex with men
- Have many sexual partners
- Are a health care or emergency worker, or if you come into contact with blood during your work
- Are a prisoner
- Are a kidney dialysis patient
- Have a blood clotting disorder and are treated with blood products
- Already have a liver disease such as hepatitis C
- Have received a liver transplant
- Are a resident or staff member at a facility for people with intellectual disabilities
- Intend staying for a long time in high-risk areas overseas
- Adopt children from overseas. These children should be tested for hepatitis B and, if they have the virus, members of the adoptive family should be immunised.

Before immunisation

Before receiving the vaccine, tell your doctor or nurse if you or your child:

- Is unwell on the day of immunisation (temperature over 38.5C)
- Has had a severe reaction to any vaccine previously
- Has any allergies.

Possible side effects of the vaccine

Side effects of immunisation are uncommon and, if they occur, quickly disappear. Minor side effects may include:

- Mild temperature
- Soreness, redness and swelling at the injection site
- Drowsiness or tiredness
- Irritability or crying – your child may appear generally unsettled.

There is a very small risk of a serious allergic reaction to any vaccine. It is important to stay at the clinic where the immunisation was given for 15 minutes after the immunisation.

Reducing the side effects

You can reduce the side effects of the vaccine by:

- Giving your child extra fluids to drink
- Not overdressing your child
- Applying a cold, wet cloth over the sore injection site
- Giving your child paracetamol to reduce any discomfort (note the recommended dose for the age of your child).

If you are concerned about any reaction to the vaccine, contact your doctor or hospital.

You can still catch other blood-borne diseases

Being immunised against hepatitis B does not protect you against HIV, hepatitis C or other diseases spread by blood or bodily fluids. It is important that you take precautions to ensure you are not exposed to these.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local council immunisation service
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Your local community health centre
- Immunisation Program, Department of Human Services Victoria Tel. 1300 882 008
- National Immunisation Infoline Tel. 1800 671 811

Things to remember

- Hepatitis B can cause serious illness or death and lead to liver disease and cancer.
- Babies can contract hepatitis B from their mother during and at the time of birth.
- Immunisation is about 95 per cent effective and is recommended for all infants and young children, adolescents and those in high-risk groups.
- A full recommended course of hepatitis B injections must be given before your child is protected. It is recommended that this course of immunisation begins at birth.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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