

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis means inflammation (swelling and pain) of the liver. Hepatitis B (HBV) is a viral infection that can lead to serious illness or death. The virus is found in the blood and, to a lesser degree, in body fluids such as semen and vaginal secretions.

You can get hepatitis B through having unsafe sex, sharing unsterile piercing or injecting drug equipment and other activities where the blood of an infected person enters your bloodstream. It may also be passed from a mother with long-term hepatitis B to her baby. In about 30 to 40 per cent of cases, infections occur without a known cause.

Most adults who catch hepatitis B recover completely and do not require ongoing treatment. 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.

Symptoms of hepatitis B

Some people who are infected with hepatitis B do not become very ill and their symptoms may be mild and flu-like. Some do not become sick at all. Children are less likely to have symptoms than adults when infected.

In more severe cases, hepatitis B can cause:

- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Pain in the liver (under the right ribcage)
- Fever
- Pain in the joints
- Jaundice (when the eyes and skin become yellow).

Normally these symptoms disappear in a few weeks. However, even when the person feels much better, he or she may still be infectious. Most adults who become infected with the hepatitis B virus recover completely and do not become infected again. A few people become very ill and some may even die.

Long-term hepatitis B infection

A small proportion of people who become infected with the hepatitis B virus develop a long-term hepatitis B infection. They may 'carry' the virus in their bloodstream for their entire life without showing any symptoms or even knowing they have it. 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. This occurs more commonly in some population groups including people from China, South East Asia, the Pacific Islands and sub-Saharan Africa, and among Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders.

How hepatitis B is spread

Hepatitis B is spread through contact with blood that contains the virus. If infected blood enters another person's bloodstream, that person may become infected. This can occur through:

- Sharing unsterile equipment used for injecting drugs
- Piercing the skin with equipment that is not properly cleaned, disinfected and sterilised

- Sharing razor blades or toothbrushes
- One person's infected blood coming into contact with open cuts or mucous membrane on another person.

All blood and blood products produced for medical purposes in Australia are carefully screened for hepatitis B (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). The Australian Red Cross Blood Service has more information on their Transfusion Medicine Services website.

The virus can also be spread:

- **If people have unprotected sex** – for example, without a condom, especially if there is blood present.
- **From mother to baby** – mothers who have long-term hepatitis B sometimes pass the virus to their children. Some babies are infected in the womb (rarely) or during birth. However, most infection occurs shortly after birth. If the newborn baby is quickly immunised, he or she can be protected from the disease.

Preventing the spread of hepatitis B

Everyone can take simple steps to protect themselves against hepatitis B.

- Make sure you and your child are immunised.
- Use condoms every time you have anal or vaginal sex.
- Avoid oral sex if you or your partner has herpes, ulcers or bleeding gums. It is unlikely that you will contract hepatitis B through oral sex unless blood is present.
- Choose to have any body piercing or tattooing done by an experienced practitioner who follows good sterilisation and hygiene practices and works at premises registered by their local council.
- If you inject drugs, **never** share needles and syringes or other equipment such as spoons, swabs or water. Always use sterile needles and syringes. These are available from Needle and Syringe Programs and some pharmacists. Always wash your hands before and after injecting.
- Wear single-use gloves if you give someone first aid or clean up blood or body fluids.

If you have hepatitis B, you should:

- Avoid sharing injecting equipment or personal items such as toothbrushes or razors.
- Make sure your partner and close contacts are immunised against hepatitis B.
- Completely cover any cut or wound with a waterproof dressing.
- Practice safe sex.
- Consider discussing your condition with your healthcare provider when undergoing any medical or dental procedure, although there is no legal obligation to do so.

Diagnosis of hepatitis B

There are different blood tests that can be performed to determine if you are or have been infected with hepatitis B. It can take up to six months for the blood tests to confirm infection and follow-up testing may be required. Remember that during this time you may be infected with hepatitis B.

There are also other tests that can assess liver damage from hepatitis B. The interpretation of these tests can be complicated and specialist advice is needed, so it is best to consult with your doctor.

Treatment for hepatitis B

Most adults who become infected with hepatitis B will clear the infection by themselves and require no ongoing treatment. Only a few (about five per cent) will develop long-term hepatitis B and require longer term treatment. These treatments can clear the virus and reduce liver damage.

Current treatments available include interferons and antiviral medications. Some treatments are covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

If you have long-term hepatitis B, you should consult with your doctor who will monitor your condition and, if necessary, refer you to a specialist. It is also a good idea to limit how much alcohol you drink and eat a well-balanced, low fat diet.

Immunisation and HALO

Generally, the immunisations you may need are decided by your health, age, lifestyle and occupation. Together, these factors are referred to as HALO.

HALO is defined as:

- **Health** – some health conditions or factors may make you more vulnerable to vaccine-preventable diseases. For example, premature birth, asthma, diabetes, heart, lung, spleen or kidney conditions, Down syndrome and HIV will mean you may benefit from additional or more frequent immunisations.
- **Age** – at different ages you need protection from different vaccine-preventable diseases. Australia's National Immunisation Program sets out recommended immunisations for babies, children, older people and other people at risk, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Most recommended vaccines are available at no cost to these groups.
- **Lifestyle** – lifestyle choices can have an impact on your immunisation needs. Travelling overseas to certain locations, planning a family, sexual activity, smoking, and playing contact sport that may expose you directly to someone else's blood, will mean you may benefit from additional or more frequent immunisations.
- **Occupation** – you are likely to require additional or more frequent immunisations if you work in an occupation that exposes you to vaccine-preventable diseases or puts you into contact with people who are more susceptible to problems from vaccine-preventable diseases such as babies or young children, pregnant women, the elderly, and people with chronic or acute health conditions. Workers in aged care, childcare, healthcare, emergency service or sewerage repair and maintenance need to discuss their immunisation needs with their doctor. Some employers help with the cost of relevant vaccinations for their employees.

Immunisation for hepatitis B

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. To be immunised, contact your doctor or local council.

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

- All babies
- All people who live in a household with someone who has hepatitis B
- All students in year 7 in school, if they have not already received the vaccine
- Injecting drug users
- People living with HIV.

Immunisation is also recommended if you:

- Have a sexual partner who has hepatitis B, are male and have sex with men or 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 or have a blood clotting disorder that is treated with blood products
- Already have a liver disease such as hepatitis C or 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 or adopt children from overseas.

Remember that 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.

See a doctor immediately if you are exposed to hepatitis B

If you think you have been exposed to hepatitis B, see a doctor immediately. Your doctor can give you treatment in some instances, which greatly reduces the risk of you becoming infected with hepatitis B.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Your local council immunisation service
- Australian Red Cross Blood Service - Transfusion Medicine Services Tel. 9694 0152
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Immunisation Program - Department of Health Victoria, Tel. 1300 882 008
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for information about where to get clean needles and syringes for drug users
- National Immunisation Infoline Tel. 1800 671 811

Things to remember

- Hepatitis B is a viral infection that causes liver inflammation and may lead to serious illness or death.
- In about 30 to 40 per cent of cases, infections occur without a known cause.
- The virus is spread through sharing unsterile injecting or piercing equipment or other activities where the blood of an infected person enters your bloodstream. It can also be passed through unsafe sex or from an infected mother to her baby.
- Immunisation is about 95 per cent effective and is recommended for all infants and young children, adolescents and those in high-risk groups.

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

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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