

Hepatitis B – A Deadly Disease

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious disease caused by a highly infectious virus that attacks the liver which can lead to severe illness, liver damage, and in some cases even death.

Who can get hepatitis B virus infection?

You may be at risk if you:

- Have a job that exposes you to infected human blood
- Are in constant touch with someone who has lifelong Hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection
- Inject drugs
- Have jaundice
- Received blood transfusions in the past before proper blood testing was available
- Have hemophilia
- Travel internationally to areas with a high prevalence of hepatitis B

How is Hepatitis B virus spread?

In people infected with Hepatitis, virus is found in their blood and certain body fluids such as serum, semen and vaginal secretions. HBV is not found in sweat, tears, urine, or respiratory secretions. Contact with even small amounts of infected blood can cause infection.

Where is Hepatitis B virus found?

Hepatitis B virus can spread through:

- an infected mother to her child during birth
- contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person
- during direct contact with a chronically infected person
- using unsterilized needles in ear or body piercing, tattooing, or acupuncture
- using the same immunization
- having unprotected sex

Hepatitis B virus DOES NOT spread through:

- casual contact like holding hands
- eating food prepared by an infected person
- visiting an infected person's home, sneezing or coughing

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Nearly half the persons who get Hepatitis B virus infection don't have any symptoms or signs of the disease. If people do have signs or symptoms, they may experience any or all of the following symptoms:

- loss of appetite
- yellowing of skin and eyes (jaundice)
- nausea, vomiting

- fever leading to weakness, tiredness, inability to work for weeks or months
- abdominal pain and/or joint pain
- dark urine

Can persons infected with Hepatitis B infection recover?

Nearly 95% of adults recover after few months. They clear the infection from their bodies and become immune. Unfortunately, about 5% of adults and up to 90% of children under age five are unable to clear the infection from their bodies; they become chronically infected.

How does one know if he/she has Hepatitis B infection?

The only way to know if someone is infected with Hepatitis B is by having blood tests. There are many blood tests available in hospitals and testing centres.

What does it mean to be chronically infected with hepatitis B virus?

People who do not recover from Hepatitis B infection are chronically infected. A chronically infected person is someone who has had Hepatitis B virus in her/his blood for more than six months. Children less than five years of age have a greater risk. The younger the child is at the time of infection, the greater is the risk for his/her life.

Chronically infected persons are at significantly higher risk than the general population for liver failure or liver cancer.

How can one take care of oneself if he/she is chronically infected with Hepatitis B?

A person with Hepatitis B virus infection should regularly see a physician who is an expert in management of liver disease. The physician will do tests to check the health of the liver as well as test for evidence of liver cancer. Chronically infected persons should avoid alcohol because alcohol can injure the liver. If there are any liver test abnormalities, one should consult a liver specialist regarding further testing and treatment.

If the liver disease has progressed.....

- Get a yearly influenza vaccination. Patients with severe liver disease (cirrhosis) should also receive pneumococcal vaccine.
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A. Hepatitis A can further damage the liver.

What can ONE do to protect others from Hepatitis B virus infection?

To protect others from getting HBV infection, it is important to protect them from contact with infected blood and other infectious body fluids including semen and vaginal secretions.

Important DOs and DON'Ts for people with chronic HBV infection

DO:

- Cover all cuts and open sores with a bandage.
- Discard used items carefully so no one is accidentally exposed to the infected blood.

- Wash the hands well after touching blood or infectious body fluids.
- Tell household members to see their doctors for testing and vaccination for hepatitis B.
- Tell the doctors that you are chronically infected with Hepatitis B virus.
- See the doctor regularly to check liver for abnormalities including cancer.

DON'T:

Share toothbrushes, razors, washcloths, and needles for ear or body piercing, or anything that may have come in contact with blood or infectious body fluids.

Share syringes and needles

Donate blood, plasma, body organs or tissue

What are the long-term effects of Hepatitis B virus infection?

Hepatitis B virus infection is the most common cause of liver cancer worldwide and ranks second only to cigarettes as the world's leading cause of cancer.

Is there a cure for hepatitis B?

There are some medications available that can help a person who is already infected with HBV.

Why is hepatitis B so serious in pregnant women?

Pregnant women who are infected with HBV can transmit the disease to their babies. These babies may develop lifelong Hepatitis B virus infections, and develop liver failure or liver cancer later in life. All pregnant women should be tested early in pregnancy to determine if they are infected with Hepatitis B virus. If the blood test is positive, the baby should be vaccinated for hepatitis B.

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

The vaccine can provide protection in 90-95% of healthy young adults. The vaccine can be given safely to infants, children, and adults usually in three doses over an approximate 6 months period. Hepatitis B vaccine is very safe, and side effects are rare. For more details you may contact the nearby doctor in your area or a dispensary.