

HEPATITIS B

PERSONAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. The virus, which is called Hepatitis B virus (HBV), can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, liver failure and death.

How is Hepatitis B spread?

The most common way the disease is spread is through unprotected sexual contact, sharing needles used for injecting drugs or medication, accidental needle sticks among health care workers, or from infected mother to baby. The virus is in blood, semen and vaginal fluids. When one of these infected fluids contacts mucous membranes (soft wet surfaces of the body) or enters through breaks in the skin, the virus may be passed to an uninfected person. An infected mother can pass the virus to her baby at birth.

Clinical signs and symptoms occur more often in adults than in infants or children, who usually have an asymptomatic acute course. However, approximately 50% of adults who have acute infections are asymptomatic. Symptoms may begin from 60 days to 150 days after exposure. On average it takes between 2 and 3 months after the virus enters the body for symptoms to begin. Most people are contagious several weeks before symptoms appear, and for as long as the virus is in their body. Most acute infections result in complete recovery. However, the risk of progressing to chronic is age dependent (i.e., 2-6% of people over 5 years of age; 30% of children 1-5 years; and up to 90% of infants). People with chronic infection can infect others and are at increased risk of serious liver disease including cirrhosis and liver cancer. Several thousand persons in the U.S. die each year due to cirrhosis and liver cancer.

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B infection. Consult with your physician regarding the availability of any experimental treatment programs. It is important to continue follow up with your doctor in order to monitor the course of the infection. The doctor may recommend supportive measures such as rest, adequate nutrition and fluid intake. Several antiviral medications are available to treat chronic hepatitis B.

How can we prevent Hepatitis B?

Over the past two decades, a comprehensive immunization strategy has been implemented and includes: universal immunization of infants beginning at birth, routine hepatitis B screening of pregnant women and appropriate immunoprophylaxis of infants born to hepatitis B positive women, routine immunization of children and adolescents not previously immunized and immunization of adults at increased risk of infection.

Ways to protect yourself are:

- Hepatitis B vaccine is the best protection.
- Do not use IV drugs. If you do, do not share needles (works, etc.).
- Practice safer sex. A mutually faithful relationship with one other person is safest. Use latex condoms if you or your partner have other partners, use IV drugs, or are infected with Hepatitis B or other sexually transmitted diseases. Remember, condoms reduce but don't eliminate risks of sexually transmitted diseases including Hepatitis B.
- Avoid direct contact with another person's blood or body fluids. If contact occurs, cleanse the area immediately with soap and water.
- Don't share toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers or other personal items which may become contaminated with blood.
- Consider the potential risks involved with tattooing or body piercing.

SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS B

- Abdominal pain
- Vomiting
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Dark urine
- Jaundice
- Sometimes rash or aches in joints

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