

Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a viral infection of the liver that affects 140,000-320,000 Americans each year. Of those infected with hepatitis B virus, 6-10% develop a chronic (long-term) infection. It is estimated that there are 1-1.25 million chronically infected persons in the United States.

Hepatitis B virus is different from the viruses that cause hepatitis A or C. Prior infection with or immunization for those viruses does not give protection against hepatitis B virus.

How do you get hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B virus is passed on through contact with infected blood or blood products, as well as through sexual intercourse. Anyone can get hepatitis B, but some groups of persons considered to have a higher risk of infection include:

- persons who inject drugs
- persons who get tattoos or body/ear piercing with unsterile needles
- men who have sex with men
- sexually active heterosexuals
- sexual/household contacts of infected persons
- infants born to infected mothers
- infants/children of immigrants from areas of the world where hepatitis B virus is common
- persons who adopt hepatitis B infected children from Asia, parts of Africa, South America, and Eastern and Mediterranean Europe
- health care workers
- hemodialysis patients

How do I know if I have hepatitis B?

When a healthy adult is infected with hepatitis B virus, his/her body can respond in several different ways.

In about 50% of cases, the person does not develop any symptoms.

If symptoms develop, generally within 2 to 3 months after infection, many people assume they have the flu because many of the symptoms resemble those caused by flu:

- fever, nausea, vomiting, or stomach aches
- feeling tired

- muscle aches and/or pain in the bone joints
- eyes may turn yellow and the urine turn dark

About 1% of infected persons develop life-threatening, rapidly progressing hepatitis. These people may suddenly collapse with tiredness, have yellowing of the skin and eyes, and develop swelling in their stomach. This condition develops very suddenly and can be fatal if not treated immediately. Approximately 140-320 people die each year in this country from fulminant hepatitis B.

About 90% of the people infected with hepatitis B virus will develop antibodies against the disease and will totally clear the virus from their bodies. Although they may have some symptoms, these people recover without difficulty.

In about 5-10% of all hepatitis B virus infections, the individual never develops antibodies to the virus and becomes chronically infected, often without even knowing it. This happens to 8,000-32,000 Americans each year.

Chronic carriers of hepatitis B virus have an increased risk of developing liver diseases, such as cirrhosis or liver cancer. In the United States, these diseases cause 5,000-6,000 deaths each year among chronic carriers of hepatitis B.

Chronic carriers may not have symptoms themselves, but they can pass the virus to others. Those individuals may or may not develop symptoms of hepatitis B. Chronic carriers need to tell their doctor, dentist and sex partners about their infection, so that these persons can take proper safety measures.

How can I protect myself from hepatitis B?

Persons who have an increased risk of hepatitis B infection should be vaccinated. Several different hepatitis B vaccines are on the market and require 3-4 injections over a number of months.

Under federal OSHA rules, hepatitis B vaccination must be offered, at the employer's expense, to workers who's job involves contact with blood or blood products at least once a month.

Hepatitis B vaccine is given to infants along with their other routine immunizations. Older children also may be offered vaccination.

Pregnant women should be tested to see if they are currently or chronically infected with hepatitis B virus. If they are, their newborn babies can be started immediately on the vaccination series against this disease. This is a very successful strategy for preventing infection in newborn babies who about 90% of the time will go on to become chronic carriers like their mothers.

Unvaccinated persons can protect themselves from infection by "barrier" techniques,

such as latex gloves, when handling blood or blood products, or when cleaning up blood spills. Condoms serve as barriers to hepatitis B and other infections during sexual intercourse.

I was stuck by a needle that I found outside. What do I do?

In general, simply being stuck with a needle without any injection of blood or other materials, does not constitute a risk for hepatitis B virus or other bloodborne diseases. The wound should be rinsed thoroughly and forced to bleed, if possible. Whether or not you should receive antibiotics or a tetanus shot should be discussed with your physician.

If this injury occurred while you were working, follow your employer's policies regarding such injuries.

Can hepatitis B be treated?

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B.

For adults with chronic hepatitis B, there are several treatment options, such as lamivudine and interferon therapy.