



## What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an infectious disease of the liver caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). About 50% of adults and 10% of children develop symptoms after HBV infection, which can be acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term).

## What is acute hepatitis B?

About 20 to 40 acute cases of HBV infection are reported in WA each year. Most of these cases are between 15 and 30 years of age. After an incubation period of 2 to 6 months, HBV infection can cause an illness with symptoms including tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, weight loss, abdominal discomfort, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes and dark-coloured urine). Less common symptoms include fever, arthritis, and rash. About 1 in 100 hospitalised patients die from acute HBV infection. Although most acute cases are associated with unsafe sex or drug injecting practices, the source of infection for many other cases is unknown.

## What is chronic hepatitis B?

About 95% of adults infected with the HBV make a complete recovery. However, up to 90% of babies and 5% of older children and adults are unable to get rid of the HBV and remain infected for many years, even though they usually do not have any symptoms. People with chronic HBV infection are called hepatitis B 'carriers' and can infect other people with the HBV. In Australia, about one person in every 1,000 is a hepatitis B carrier and about 1 in 5 carriers will die prematurely of either cirrhosis (liver failure) or liver cancer (about 20 years after infection). Adults from Central or South America, Southern or Eastern Europe, Africa, India, the Middle East, China, South East Asia, the Pacific Islands, or indigenous Australians have a higher proportion of chronic HBV infection.

## How is hepatitis B spread?

Blood is the most infectious source of the HBV, but other body fluids including semen, vaginal secretions, saliva and breast milk can also transmit the HBV. Tears, sweat, urine, and faeces do not appear to transmit the HBV. Both acute and chronic hepatitis B patients are infectious. In developing countries, babies born to mothers with chronic hepatitis B are often infected with the HBV during birth.

## What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There is no effective, specific treatment for acute HBV infection. However, there are some drugs available for the treatment of chronic HBV infection.

## How do I avoid catching hepatitis B?

HBV transmission can be prevented by:

- ◆ vaccination
- ◆ not sharing any drug injecting equipment (e.g. needles, syringes, spoons, tourniquets, water)
- ◆ not having unprotected sex
- ◆ not sharing toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, or nail files
- ◆ demanding sterile equipment for tattooing, ear or body-piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis
- ◆ immediately cleaning and covering wounds

## What do I do if I think I've been exposed to hepatitis B?

See your doctor immediately. If you haven't been vaccinated against hepatitis B and you've only been exposed to the HBV recently (within 3 days), your doctor can prevent you catching hepatitis B by giving you hepatitis B immunoglobulin and hepatitis B vaccine. If you were exposed to the HBV a long time ago your doctor can test your blood to see if you were infected.