



Hepatitis B

August 2008

While every effort has been taken to ensure the accuracy of the information in this publication, it cannot replace medical advice. Please visit a health professional if you have any concerns with your health. Included below is a list of places where you can get more information.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis means a sickness of the liver. It can be caused by viruses such as hepatitis A, B, C, D, E and G, alcohol, some chemicals and drugs.

How do you get hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is easier to catch than HIV/AIDS. The hepatitis B virus is mainly spread through direct contact with infected blood and blood products, but you can also be infected through other body fluids including semen and vaginal fluids.

You can catch hepatitis B:

- from a tiny amount of blood, too small to see
- by having vaginal, oral or anal sex with an infected person if you don't use a condom
- from sharing needles, syringes and other drug injecting equipment with an infected person
- if you have a job that involves possible contact with human blood or body fluids

If you have hepatitis B, your baby can be infected during birth or soon after.

If you share a house with a carrier, you need to be especially careful (see How Do I Protect Myself).

In Australia, you are very unlikely to get hepatitis B through blood transfusion or organ transplantation.

What are the signs and symptoms of hepatitis B?

About half of all adults and most children with hepatitis B have no symptoms at all. Some people feel well for several months before having any symptoms.

Symptoms include:

- fever
- extreme tiredness for weeks or months
- loss of appetite, nausea (feeling sick) and vomiting
- joint pains
- eyes or skin turning yellow (jaundice)

Most adults recover completely. They can't catch hepatitis B again.

However, some adults, and most babies become hepatitis B carriers. Carriers often don't feel sick but will have the virus in their blood for years. Carriers can develop serious liver diseases, including liver failure and liver cancer, 20 or more years after first getting hepatitis B.

Carriers can also infect other people, even if they feel well and don't have any symptoms.





How do I know if I have hepatitis B?

A blood test can show if a person has been infected with hepatitis B in the past, and whether a person is chronically infected. Other tests, such as liver function test, can show if any damage has been done to the liver.

What do I do if I have hepatitis B?

Go and see your GP or doctor of choice as soon as possible if you think you may have Hepatitis B.

If you are infected:

- Do not donate blood, organs or tissue if you have hepatitis B
- Advise your doctor and dentist that you are infected
- Be very careful to make sure that other people are not exposed to your blood or body fluids. Clean up any spills with a paper towel and clean thoroughly with detergent and water until no obvious stains are left. If a large blood spill occurs on carpet, it may need to be shampooed or steam cleaned.
- Cover your wounds with a waterproof bandage
- Use condoms, water-based lubricant and dental dams with new sexual partners, and with partners who are not already immune.
- Never share needles, syringes or any drug injecting equipment. Make sure injecting equipment is new and/or sterile.

How do I get treated?

If you are exposed to hepatitis B, there is special treatment that can prevent infection if you see a doctor immediately. There are medicines to help long-term carriers of hepatitis B.

How do I reduce the risks of getting hepatitis B?

You will be almost 100% safe if you are fully vaccinated against hepatitis B. This involves 3 injections over 6 months for adults.

There are some other simple ways to protect yourself against hepatitis B and other infections:

- Never share needles, syringes or any drug injecting equipment. Make sure injecting equipment is new and/or sterile.
- Practice safe sex - use a condom or dental dam, and water-based lubricant. The risk increases if you have many partners, anal sex and/or sex during a woman's period.
- Before considering any body art (such as tattooing or piercing) make sure the body artist uses only sterilised equipment, and new razors and needles each time.
- Don't share personal hygiene items such as razors, toothbrushes and dental floss.
- Clean and cover any bleeding cuts and grazes immediately.
- All blood spills – including those that have already dried – should be cleaned and disinfected with a mixture of bleach and water (one part household bleach to 10 parts water). Gloves should always be used when cleaning up any blood spills. Even dried blood can present a risk to others. Wrap the towels and gloves in a plastic bag before putting them in the bin.

Is there a vaccination against hepatitis B?

Yes, hepatitis B vaccination is safe and effective.





Who should get vaccinated against hepatitis B?

Sexual partners and people living with hepatitis B carriers should be tested for hepatitis B. If not infected, they should be vaccinated.

Vaccination is also free to some high-risk groups - ask your GP or doctor of choice.

Hepatitis B vaccination is recommended if:

- you ever take part in injecting drug use; tattooing and body piercing
- unprotected vaginal, oral or anal sex with casual partners; or sex work
- you are a man who has sex with men
- you have chronic liver disease other than hepatitis B
- you are on dialysis
- your work brings you into contact with blood or other body fluids
- you are an inmate or staff of a custodial institution (prison)
- you live or work with people with intellectual disabilities
- you travel to countries where hepatitis B is common (ask your GP or travel health specialist)
- you are a member of a family who has adopted children from overseas
- you are a health care worker

How do I get vaccinated against hepatitis B?

There are 3 injections over 6 months for adults. Every baby born in Australia and every child in Year 7 can get free hepatitis B vaccine.

Where can I find more information on hepatitis B?

Contact your GP or a doctor of your choice, local Population Health Unit, community nurse or health worker, or:

Central Immunisation Clinic

(08) 9321 1312

HealthInfo

1300 135 030

Sexual Health Helpline

(08) 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 toll free

Hepatitis Council of WA Inc

(08) 9328 8538 or 1800 800 070 toll-free

You can find more information about hepatitis on the Internet:

www.hepatitiswa.com.au

www.hepnet.com

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis

http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hepb_ez/index.htm

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<http://www.public.health.wa.gov.au/cproot/700/2/Hep%20B%20Factsheet.pdf>

