

Hepatitis B



Frequently Asked Questions

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is caused by a virus that infects a person's liver. The hepatitis B virus can stay in a person's body for his or her life and cause serious liver problems.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluids infected with hepatitis B virus enters a person's body. People can become infected with the virus through:

- Birth (spread from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth, which can happen during a vaginal delivery or a C-section)
- Sex with an infected partner
- Sharing items such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, needles and syringes, and glucose meters with an infected person
- Direct contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person
- Exposure to blood from needlesticks or other sharp instruments

Hepatitis B virus is *not* spread by sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, or sneezing. A woman with hepatitis B who chooses to breastfeed her infant does *not* increase the infant's chance of getting hepatitis B infection. Although there is no need to delay breastfeeding, all mothers should be educated on proper nipple care to prevent cracking and bleeding.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Many people with hepatitis B do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. If symptoms occur, they can include:

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Lack of appetite
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal pain/cramps
- Dark urine, grey-colored stool
- Yellow skin or eyes

Can hepatitis B be prevented?

Yes. The best way to prevent hepatitis B is by getting vaccinated. The hepatitis B vaccine is typically given as a series of 3 shots over a period of 6 months. The entire series is needed for long-term protection.

Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?

Hepatitis B vaccine is very safe. The most common side effect is soreness at the injection site or slight fever. Serious side effects are rare.

Who should receive the hepatitis B vaccine series?

The vaccine is recommended for children in the United States and is recommended for high-risk adults. This includes people living with someone infected with hepatitis B, travelers to certain countries, and healthcare and public safety workers exposed to blood. People with high-risk sexual behaviors, men who have sex with men, people who inject drugs, and people who have certain medical conditions, including diabetes, should talk to their doctor about getting vaccinated.

In addition to getting the hepatitis B vaccine, how else can I protect myself from hepatitis B?

- Use condoms or other latex barrier protection for oral, anal, and vaginal sex. Sexual contact is the most common way the virus is spread.
- Do not share personal care items such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, needles and syringes, and glucose meters.
- Wear gloves when touching other people's blood or body fluids.

How do I know if I am infected with hepatitis B?

The only way to know if you have hepatitis B is to get tested. Blood tests can determine if a person has been infected and cleared the virus, is currently infected, or has never been infected.

Will hepatitis B go away without treatment?

Most adults are able to fight off the infection and clear the virus from their blood. The likelihood depends upon the age at which someone becomes infected. For example, approximately 90 percent of infected infants will develop a chronic (life-long) infection, but the risk drops down to 6-10 percent when a person is infected over 5 years of age.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

People with hepatitis B should not be excluded from work or school. They should be counseled, however, on the safety measures they should take to reduce the chance of exposing others to their blood or body fluids.

Where can I get more information?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health
<http://www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/hepatitisb.shtml>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HBV/index.htm>
- Immunization Action Coalition
<http://www.immunize.org>