



Hepatitis B

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a contagious liver disease caused by the Hepatitis B virus (HBV). The virus, can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, liver failure and even death.

How is Hepatitis B spread?

The most common way Hepatitis B is spread is through unprotected sex with an infected partner, sharing needles used for injecting drugs or medication, accidental needle sticks among health care workers, or from infected mother to baby during childbirth. The virus is in blood, semen and vaginal fluids. Hepatitis B is spread when one of these fluids from an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person.

Adults and children >5 years of age are more likely to have symptoms from acute Hepatitis B infection. Infants or children <5, usually do not experience symptoms during an acute Hepatitis B infection. On average, symptoms appear 90 days (3 months) after exposure, but can appear anytime between 6 weeks and 6 months of exposure. 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 infection is age dependent. People with chronic infection can infect others and are at increased risk of serious liver disease including cirrhosis and liver cancer. Several thousand people in the U.S. die each year from Hepatitis B related liver disease or liver cancer.

How is Hepatitis B treated?

There is no specific treatment for acute Hepatitis B infection. 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 infection.

How can Hepatitis B be prevented?

Over the past three decades, a comprehensive immunization strategy has been implemented and includes: immunization of children, 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 should also be assessed.

Ways to protect yourself from Hepatitis B are:

- Hepatitis B vaccine is the best protection.
- Do not use IV drugs. Do not share needles (works, etc.).
- Practice safe sex. A mutually faithful relationship with one other person is safest. Use 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 the risk of becoming infected with sexually transmitted diseases, including Hepatitis B.
- Avoid direct contact with another person's blood or body fluids. If contact occurs, wash the area immediately with soap and water.
- Don't share toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers or other personal items that may be contaminated with blood.
- Consider the potential risks involved with tattooing or body piercing. You can become infected if the tools are contaminated with blood or the practitioner does not follow good health practices.
- Health care workers and other employees who are at risk of being exposed to blood and body fluids should follow universal precautions.

Symptoms of Hepatitis B:

- Abdominal pain
- Fever
- Joint pain
- Vomiting
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Grey colored stools
- Jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin)

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