

Understanding Hepatitis B

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The inflammation can be caused by a virus, alcohol or drugs. The liver may suffer damage and lose its ability to perform many important functions such as storing energy for the body, removing poisons from the blood, producing bile for digestion, and breaking down protein, fats, and carbohydrates.

There are several viruses that can cause hepatitis –types A, B, C, D and E. Hepatitis B is caused by the type B virus and is generally the most serious form of the disease. In some patients, Hepatitis B infection can develop into cirrhosis (scarring of liver tissue) or cancer of the liver.

How is Hepatitis B transmitted?

The virus is present in the blood and body fluids (semen, vaginal secretions, saliva, sweat, tears, and breast milk) of the infected person. It can only be spread by contact with the infected blood or body fluids in the following ways:

- Sexual contact
- Mother to baby during the birthing process
- Open wounds or breaks in skin
- Use of unsterilized needles (acupuncture, tattooing, ear-piercing, and I.V drug abuse)
- Sharing of razors, toothbrushes, nail files/clippers, scissors, or other personal items that are contaminated with infected blood

Not everyone will have the same symptoms or problems after being exposed to Hepatitis B. You may or may not become infected. You may have symptoms and recover; or you may be symptom-free at first, but develop problems with your liver later on. In some cases, you may become a “chronic” or long-term carrier of the disease.

What is a Hepatitis B carrier?

A carrier is a person who has Hepatitis B virus in his or her blood even after all symptoms have disappeared. A carrier can spread the disease to another person. A carrier may or may not have symptoms. In many cases, if carriers do not know that they are carriers of the virus, they can be more dangerous to others, because the disease is transmitted silently. The Hepatitis B carrier can be identified by a simple specific blood test called the hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) test.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis B?

Symptoms may be mild or absent. They may appear several weeks to months after exposure. Common symptoms include:

- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Mild fever
- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhea
- Muscle or joint pains
- Nausea
- Dark urine
- Vomiting
- Skin rashes
- Jaundice (yellowish skin and eyes)

Treatment for Hepatitis B

- Avoid alcohol and certain drugs that may be harmful to your liver
- Several medications are available to treat persons with chronic Hepatitis B. They are given as pills or injections.

• Prevention of Hepatitis B

Avoid contact with infected blood or body fluids:

- Wash hands thoroughly after contact with contaminated items
- Wear condoms during sexual contact
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, needles, scissors, nail files, or contaminated personal items
- Cover cuts and wounds with bandages
- Be vaccinated against Hepatitis B. This is recommended for all newborns, children, and persons who are at risk. Vaccination is safe; you cannot get Hepatitis B from the vaccine. Possible side effects from the vaccination include soreness at the injection site and mild fever.

Who should be vaccinated?

- Persons born or raised in countries where Hepatitis B infection is common, e.g. China, Southeast Asia, Africa
- Persons in close contact with a chronic carrier
- All newborns
- Persons with multiple sex partners
- Men who have sex with men
- Health care workers
- Patients receiving kidney dialysis, treatment for blood clotting disorders, or acupuncture treatments
- Intravenous drug abusers
- Persons who travel to or live in parts of the world where Hepatitis B is common

Why should the baby of a carrier mother be vaccinated?

The baby generally does not contract Hepatitis B in the womb, because the placenta usually prevents the virus from passing into the baby's bloodstream. The baby is exposed to the virus upon entering the birth canal of the infected mother. If the mother does not know that she is infected, and the child does not receive Hepatitis B immunization on time, the child could later become a Hepatitis B carrier and could develop serious liver disease: chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis, or liver cancer.

Since 1993, all babies born in the United States are required by law to receive the Hepatitis B vaccination in order to be fully protected against the disease. Therefore, it is important for all mothers to keep vaccination appointments for their children.

Ask your doctor or visit your local health clinic if you want to know more about Hepatitis B. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! This statement is especially true in the prevention of Hepatitis B.