



Hepatitis B Facts



What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a contagious liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus and can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness. Hepatitis B can be either “acute” or “chronic.”

- Acute hepatitis B virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first six months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis B virus. Acute infection can — but does not always — lead to chronic infection
- Chronic hepatitis B virus infection is a long-term illness that occurs when the hepatitis B virus remains in a person’s body

What causes hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluids infected with the hepatitis B virus enter the body. People can become infected with the virus during activities such as:

- Sex with an infected partner
- Sharing needles, syringes, or other drug-injection equipment
- Sharing items such as razors or toothbrushes 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

- Birth (spread from an infected mother to her baby during birth)

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Acute hepatitis B: Although most adults have symptoms with acute hepatitis B virus infection, many young children do not. Symptoms of acute hepatitis B, if they occur, can appear between six weeks and six months after exposure to the virus, but often around three months after exposure. Symptoms may last a few weeks to as long as six months and may include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Clay-coloured bowel movements
- Joint pain
- Jaundice (yellow colour in the skin or the eyes)

People without any symptoms are still able to spread the virus.

Chronic hepatitis B: Some people have ongoing symptoms similar to acute hepatitis B, but most individuals with chronic hepatitis B stay symptom free for as long as 20 or 30 years. About 15% to 25% of people with chronic hepatitis B develop serious liver conditions, such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver failure or liver cancer. Even as the liver becomes diseased, some people still do not have symptoms.

People without any symptoms are still able to spread the virus.

Who is more at risk for hepatitis B?

Although anyone can get hepatitis B, some people are at greater risk, such as those who:

- Have sex with an infected person
- Have multiple sex partners
- Have a sexually transmitted infection
- Are men who have sexual contact with other men
- Inject drugs or share needles, syringes, or other drug equipment
- Live with a person who has chronic hepatitis B
- Are infants born to infected mothers
- Are exposed to blood on the job
- Are hemodialysis patients
- Travel to countries with moderate to high rates of hepatitis B

How is hepatitis B treated?

Acute hepatitis B: There is no medication to treat acute hepatitis B. Generally rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids will help, but some people may need to be hospitalized. Once a person has recovered from hepatitis B, they cannot become infected again.

Chronic hepatitis B: People with chronic hepatitis B virus infection should seek the care of a doctor and should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease and the need for possible treatment. Several medications can be used to treat chronic hepatitis B, however, not every person with chronic hepatitis B needs to be on medication, and the drugs may cause side effects in some people.

Anybody with hepatitis B should avoid the use of alcohol and should check with a health professional before taking any prescription pills, supplements, or over-the-counter medications.

How can I reduce the risk of hepatitis B?

The best way to prevent hepatitis B is by getting the hepatitis B vaccine. The hepatitis B vaccine is safe and effective and is usually given as three shots over a six-month period. Hepatitis B vaccine is a routine immunization for Grade seven students and is available free of charge for certain high risk groups such as household and sexual contacts of people with acute and chronic hepatitis B and individuals with multiple sexual partners. Contact your healthcare provider for further information on the vaccine.

A person who thinks they may have come in contact with the virus should call their health care provider. The vaccine and/or a medication called immune globulin given within 24 hours of exposure may prevent hepatitis B infection.

A person with hepatitis B should protect close contacts from contact with their blood and other body fluids by not sharing items such as razors, toothbrushes, needles, or other objects that may have become contaminated with blood. Use of latex condoms during sexual activity may reduce transmission of hepatitis B virus. An infected person must not donate blood and should tell dental and medical care providers so that proper precautions can be followed.

