

Hepatitis B

The Facts About Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a common viral bloodborne infection that can also be sexually transmitted.

How many people have hepatitis B?

The majority of unvaccinated infants born to mothers with hepatitis B develop chronic infections. About one of every 20 people exposed to hepatitis B as an adolescent or adult develops chronic infections.¹ It is estimated that 1.25 million Americans are chronically infected; 20-30 percent of these acquired the infection in childhood.² Following the advent of routine childhood hepatitis B vaccination, the number of new infections reported yearly has declined by 2/3, from an estimated 260,000 in the 1980s to about 80,000 in 2001.²

How does someone get hepatitis B?

About half of all hepatitis B infections are transmitted through sexual activity. People who share needles when shooting drugs are at high risk for infection as well. Transmission can also occur if needles used for tattooing or body piercing are not properly sterilized and are then reused. Most newborns will become infected during the birth process if the mother is infected and the baby is not vaccinated. Hepatitis B is not transmitted through the type of casual contact that occurs in the workplace.

What are the symptoms?

Nearly 30 percent of infected people have no signs or symptoms of infection. Due to liver damage, an infected person may experience jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), severe fatigue, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting. Rash, joint pain and fever may also occur.

What are some of the long-term effects of a hepatitis B infection?

A significant number of people with hepatitis B have lifelong infections that can cause liver failure, cancer and death.

How does someone find out s(he) has hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B can be diagnosed through a variety of simple blood tests.

How is hepatitis B treated?

There are numerous drug therapies available that can be used to treat hepatitis B, but they tend to be expensive, have to be used for extended periods of time and can cause serious side effects, including depression. Even when taken diligently, the drugs are not always effective.

Am I safe if I consistently use a condom?

Studies are lacking, but given the way hepatitis B is transmitted, condoms would not be expected to eliminate your risk of infection, though they might reduce it some.

How can I avoid getting hepatitis B?

Prevention is always best. A good vaccination is now routinely administered to babies in the U.S. and available to people of all ages. To prevent exposure, don't shoot drugs. Never get a tattoo or body piercing from a place that does not have a current inspection certificate from your local health department. If you haven't had sex and don't shoot drugs, your chances of getting hepatitis B are considerably reduced. If you've already been sexually active outside a lifelong mutually faithful relationship (as in marriage), talk to your healthcare provider about getting you and your partner tested for STDs. Abstinence from sexual activity or lifetime faithfulness to one uninfected partner is the only certain way to avoid being infected sexually.

1 Chin J, ed. *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association; 2000:243-251.

2 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Viral Hepatitis B Fact Sheet. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/b/fact.htm>. Accessed July 22, 2003.

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