

Appendix 3: Hepatitis B Information sheet

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation (swelling and pain) of the liver. It can be caused by viruses, including hepatitis A, B, C and E, alcohol, some chemicals and drugs.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

After infection with hepatitis B about half of all adults and most children have no symptoms. If symptoms occur, they usually develop within 3 months of catching the infection and can include;

- loss of appetite
- nausea and/or vomiting
- stomach pain
- joint pains
- eyes or skin turning yellow (jaundice)
- light coloured faeces and dark urine
- extreme tiredness for weeks

Normally these symptoms disappear in a few weeks, and most adults recover completely and they can't catch hepatitis B again. Even though a person no longer feels sick, they can still be infectious.

After infection, some adults (about 5%), and most babies will develop chronic (long term) hepatitis B infection because they do not clear the virus from their body. People with chronic infection can infect others, even if they have no symptoms. People with chronic infection can develop serious liver diseases, including liver failure and liver cancer, 20 or more years after first getting hepatitis B. The chances of developing serious liver disease can be reduced through regular monitoring by doctors and for some patients, specific medications.

How do you get hepatitis B?

The hepatitis B virus is mainly spread through direct contact with infected blood and blood products. You can also be infected through other body fluids including semen and vaginal fluids. After the hepatitis B virus enters the body, it travels to the liver, where it stays and multiplies.

You can become infected by:

- sharing needles, syringes and other drug injecting equipment with an infected person
- vaginal, oral or anal sex with an infected person if you or they don't use a condom
- by razors or other personal care items that may have traces of blood or saliva on them
- tattooing equipment that hasn't been properly sterilised
- any injury where blood from another person enters your blood stream e.g. a needle stick injury

Hepatitis B is not spread by breast-feeding, mosquitoes, kissing, sharing food, drink or eating utensils, coughing, sneezing or skin-to-skin contact such as handshakes.

If you are pregnant and have hepatitis B, your baby can be infected during birth or soon after. Getting your baby immunised immediately after delivery can greatly reduce the risk of infection.

In Australia, you are very unlikely to get hepatitis B through blood transfusion or organ transplantation because of thorough screening and safety practices by the Australian Red Cross Blood Service.

How do I know if I have hepatitis B?

A blood test can show if a person has been infected with hepatitis B recently or in the past, and whether a person is chronically infected. Other tests, such as liver function tests, can show if any damage has been done to the liver. Pregnant women are routinely tested as part of antenatal care.

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis B infection:

- it is up to you to decide whether or not to disclose that you have hepatitis B. There are only a small number of instances where you may be required by law to tell others you have it
- it is recommended you tell your clinician that you are infected; your clinician can monitor your health, and may refer you to a specialist
- never share needles, syringes or any drug injecting equipment. Make sure injecting equipment is new and/or sterile
- ensure your partner and close contacts are tested for hepatitis B and immunised against hepatitis B if they are not immune
- always use condoms, water-based lubricant and dental dams with new sexual partners, and with partners who are not already immune
- do not donate blood, organs or tissue
- be very careful to make sure that other people are not exposed to your blood or body fluids. Clean up any spills with a paper towel and clean thoroughly with detergent and water until no obvious stains are left. If a large blood spill occurs on carpet, it may need to be shampooed or steam cleaned
- cover your wounds with a waterproof bandage
- don't share personal items such as razors or toothbrushes.

What do I do if I think I have been exposed to hepatitis B?

See a doctor immediately. Your doctor can give you treatment that can reduce the risk of infection.

How do I reduce the risk of getting hepatitis B?

You will be almost 100% safe if you are fully vaccinated against hepatitis B. There are some other simple ways to protect yourself against hepatitis B and other infections:

- never share needles, syringes or any drug injecting equipment. Make sure injecting equipment is new and/or sterile
- practise safe sex – use a condom or dental dam, and water-based lubricant. The risk increases if you have many partners, anal sex and/or sex during a woman's period
- before considering any body art (such as tattooing or piercing) make sure the body artist uses only sterilised equipment, and new razors and needles each time
- don't share personal hygiene items such as razors and toothbrushes

- Clean and disinfect all blood spills — including those that have already dried —with a mixture of bleach and water (one part household bleach to 10 parts water). Always wear gloves when cleaning up any blood spills. Even dried blood can present a risk to others. Wrap the towels and gloves in a plastic bag before putting them in the bin

How do I get vaccinated against hepatitis B?

For adults and older children hepatitis B vaccine is given in a 3-dose schedule at times 0, 1 and 6 months.

For new babies, a dose of hepatitis B vaccine is given at birth, followed by 3 doses of a hepatitis B-containing combination vaccine, given at 2, 4 and 6 months of age.

Who should get vaccinated against hepatitis B?

The sexual partners and people living with someone with hepatitis B should be tested for hepatitis B. If not infected, and not immune, they should be vaccinated. Vaccination may be free to some high-risk groups – ask your GP or healthcare provider.

The current Australian Immunisation Handbook recommends hepatitis B vaccination for the following groups:

- Infants and young children
- Adolescents
- Household or other close ('household-like') contacts of people with hepatitis B
- Sexual contacts of people with hepatitis B
- Migrants from hepatitis B endemic countries
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Adult haemodialysis patients and patients with severely impaired renal function in whom dialysis is anticipated
- Solid organ and haematopoietic stem cell transplant recipients
- HIV-positive adults and other immunocompromised adults
- People with chronic liver disease and/or hepatitis C
- People who inject drugs
- Recipients of certain blood products
- People with developmental disabilities
- Inmates of correctional facilities
- Sex industry workers
- Staff directly involved in patient care and/or the handling of human tissue, blood or body fluids
- Police, members of the armed forces, emergency services staff and staff of correctional facilities if they are assigned to duties that may involve exposure to human tissue, blood or body fluids
- Funeral workers, embalmers and other workers who have regular contact with human tissue, blood or body fluids and/or used needles or syringes
- Staff involved in both residential and non-residential care of people with developmental disabilities
- Workers who perform skin penetration procedures (e.g. tattooists, body-piercers).
- Travellers to hepatitis B endemic areas, either long-term or for frequent short terms, or who are likely to undertake activities that increase their risks of exposure to HBV during travel.

Where can I find more information on hepatitis B or immunisation against hepatitis B?

Contact your GP or a clinician of your choice, local health unit, community nurse or health worker.

You can find more information about hepatitis on the internet:

[Hepatitis Australia](#)

[Immunise Australia Program](#)