

Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B (formerly known as serum hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV).

Who gets hepatitis B?

Anyone can get hepatitis B. People at higher risk of becoming infected with HBV, if they have not received hepatitis B vaccine or had hepatitis B disease in the past, include:

- Intravenous (I.V.) drug users who share needles;
- Persons who have unprotected sex with multiple partners;
- Men who have sex with men (MSM);
- Household contacts of an infected person;
- Hemodialysis patients;
- Health care workers who have unprotected contact with infected blood;
- Persons who live in institutions such as developmental centers and prisons;
- Babies born to mothers infected with HBV.

How is hepatitis B spread?

The hepatitis B virus is carried in the blood and body fluids of people who have the infection. The virus can be spread by direct contact with blood, semen, and vaginal fluids, and to a lesser extent, saliva, and other body fluids of an infected person. The virus is very infectious and resistant to drying, so contact with very small amounts of blood or body fluids from an infected person can transmit the infection.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

The initial infection with hepatitis B virus can cause fatigue, poor appetite, fever, vomiting, and occasionally joint pain and/or rash, dark urine, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). Only 50% of people acutely infected will have signs and symptoms of hepatitis B infection. Signs and symptoms are less common in children.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may appear six weeks to six months after exposure, but usually within three months.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

Hepatitis B is diagnosed using various laboratory tests and the presence of certain symptoms. There are many different blood tests available to diagnose hepatitis B. They can be ordered as an individual test or as a series of tests.

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How long is a person able to spread the virus?

A person is infectious as long as live hepatitis B virus remains in his/her body. Most people resolve the infection within a few months without any complications, and eliminate the virus from their body. About 5% of adults and 90% of infants develop a chronic (long-term) infection, which means that the hepatitis B virus continues to survive in the body and cause damage to the liver. Chronic hepatitis B infection increases the risk of cirrhosis (liver scarring) and liver cancer. Persons who develop a chronic HBV infection may be infectious for life.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There is no treatment for acute HBV. Generally, rest and diet modifications are all that are needed for uncomplicated cases. Several medications are available for the treatment of chronic HBV infection. Questions and concerns about management of acute and chronic hepatitis B infection should be addressed with a healthcare provider.

What precautions should persons with HBV infection take?

Persons who are ill with symptoms of acute hepatitis B, or who have chronic HBV infection, should ensure that close contacts are not exposed to their blood or other body fluids. Close contacts, including household members and sexual partners, should receive HBV vaccine, unless they are known to be immune to HBV. Razors, toothbrushes, or any other object that may become contaminated with blood should never be shared. Environmental surfaces potentially contaminated with blood or body fluids can be cleaned with a solution of household bleach in water (i.e., 1.5 cups of 5.25% bleach in 1 gallon of water). HBV-infected persons should inform their dentists and healthcare providers about their HBV status.

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

A safe and effective vaccine is available to prevent hepatitis B. It is recommended for all babies at birth and is also recommended for people in high-risk settings who have not already been infected. Hepatitis B immune globulin is also available for people who have been exposed to the virus. It may help prevent the disease if it is given within two weeks of exposure. It should be given within 12 hours of birth to babies born to mothers with HBV infection. If you believe you have been exposed to hepatitis B, you should consult a doctor or the local health department as soon as possible.

How can I get more information about hepatitis B?

- 1) If you have concerns about hepatitis B, contact your healthcare provider.
- 2) Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/index.htm>.
- 3) Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd-vac/hepb/default.htm>.