

Understanding Hepatitis B

OVERVIEW, DIAGNOSIS, TREATMENT

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a liver disease that comes from having the Hepatitis B virus. Acute hepatitis usually happens within the first 6 months after getting the virus. Some people get better from their acute infection. When this happens, they are immune, which means that they cannot get Hepatitis B again and cannot spread the virus to others. Chronic infection means the virus stays in the body, and it can be passed to other people.

How is the virus spread?

The virus is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluids are passed from a person with the virus to a person who is not infected. The virus spreads easily through breaks in the skin or mucus membranes (nose, mouth, eyes, and other soft tissues). This can happen through:

- Sexual contact.
- Direct contact with infected blood, even in amounts too small to see.
- Sharing toothbrushes, razors, syringes, or lancets used for glucose monitors.
- Direct contact with open sores of an infected person.
- A mother passing it to her baby at birth.

You *cannot* spread it through sneezing, coughing, hugging, breastfeeding, kissing, or sharing utensils.

How do I know if I have it?

We use blood tests to diagnose Hepatitis B.

Is Hepatitis B common?

Yes. Hepatitis B is very common. Since many people have no symptoms, they may not know that they have chronic Hepatitis B and can spread it to others.

What are the symptoms?

With an acute infection, symptoms usually show up within 3 months of getting the virus and can last from 2 to 12 weeks. Chronic Hepatitis B symptoms can take up to 30 years to develop. Liver damage can happen without you knowing it. When symptoms do appear, they often are a sign of advanced liver disease. Symptoms can include fever, fatigue, abdominal pain, and jaundice (yellowing of the eyes).

How serious is it?

About 15 to 25 percent of people with chronic Hepatitis B develop serious liver problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver failure, and even liver cancer. Every year, approximately 3,000 people in the United States and more than 500,000 worldwide die from Hepatitis B-related liver disease.

Can Hepatitis B be prevented?

Yes. The best way to prevent Hepatitis B is by getting vaccinated. For adults, the Hepatitis B vaccine is given as a series of 3 shots over a period of 6 months. All 3 shots are needed for long-term protection. In general, you do not need a booster shot.

What can I do to protect my liver?

See your doctor regularly and tell us if you are taking any medications – including herbs or vitamins. People with chronic Hepatitis B should also not drink alcohol since it can speed up liver damage.

How do I get treated?

We usually recommend rest, good nutrition, a lot of fluids, and close medical monitoring. Some people may need to be hospitalized. People with chronic infection should see a doctor experienced in treating Hepatitis B. He or she can determine the most appropriate medical care. People with chronic Hepatitis B need to be monitored on a regular basis, and some will need to take medication.