

HEPATITIS B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that affects your liver. Half of the people who become infected with hepatitis B do not have any symptoms and feel fine. Symptoms may include weakness, tiredness, headache, vomiting, fever, abdominal pain and jaundice (a yellowish colour of the skin and whites of the eyes). A small number of people with hepatitis B can die after being infected. Some people develop a lifelong infection that can lead to scarring and cancer of the liver later in life. These people are called hepatitis B carriers.

What is a hepatitis B carrier?

A hepatitis B carrier is a person who has been infected with hepatitis B and may not have any symptoms, but the virus remains in their body. Carriers can spread infection to others even if they have no symptoms. Nine out of ten infected infants and 1 in 20 infected adults will become carriers. These people have not developed protection as a result of infection. They may have the hepatitis B virus in their blood and other body fluids for the rest of their lives. Most carriers appear healthy and symptom-free but some will develop serious liver problems or even liver cancer years after becoming infected.

How is hepatitis B spread?

It is spread when your blood or mucous membranes come in contact with the blood or body fluids of someone with hepatitis B infection. The most common ways include:

- Having unprotected sex with an infected person
- Sharing needles or other equipment for injecting or inhaling drugs
- From mother to her baby during childbirth
- Sharing needles, ink or other equipment tainted with blood for tattooing or body piercing
- Needlestick injuries
- Blood splashes in the eye, nose, and mouth or on broken skin.
- Sharing razors, nail clippers or toothbrushes with an infected person
- Rarely, through human bites from an infected person

How do I protect myself from getting hepatitis B?

- Get the hepatitis B vaccine especially if you are at risk: household contacts and sex partners of infected people, people with multiple sex partners, people who inject drugs, health care workers, and people who travel to areas where hepatitis B commonly occurs.
- Always use a condom/barrier protection during vaginal, anal or oral sex.
- If you use drugs, make sure you always use new needles and drug equipment that has not been used by other people.
- Always get tattoos and piercings from a licensed establishment. Ask questions: Are needles or ink shared? Is reusable equipment sterilized?

How do I find out if I have hepatitis B?

- You are at risk for developing hepatitis B infection if you have never been vaccinated and if you have had multiple sex partners, have a new sex partner, have ever shared injection drugs or drug related equipment, or have had unprotected sex with a person who has hepatitis B.
- If you are at risk or would like to know your hepatitis B status, arrange to have a blood test through your family doctor, walk in clinic or local health clinic.
- REMEMBER: Many people infected with the hepatitis B virus do not have any symptoms and are not aware they are infected.

Over...

www.healthunit.com

What do I do if I am a hepatitis B carrier?

- Take care of yourself. Getting regular medical checkups, eating a balanced diet, getting enough rest and exercise can all help to keep you healthy. Tell your doctor, dentist and other health care providers that you are a hepatitis B carrier, so that they can take the necessary precautions.
- Let your doctor or pharmacist know if you are taking or planning on taking any prescription or non-prescription drugs (e.g. over the counter medicines or herbal remedies).
- Always practice safe sex: use condoms/barrier protection for vaginal, anal, and oral sex!
- Avoid drinking alcohol since it can speed up liver damage.
- Don't share your toothbrush, razor, nail clippers or other items that may contain traces of blood. Make sure these objects are kept out of reach of others.
- Don't donate blood, semen or tissues. You may donate solid organs.
- If you use drugs, make sure you always use new needles or syringes. Never share needles or other drug-related equipment including spoons, water, wash, filters and devices for smoking and snorting drugs, like crack pipes and straws. For needle exchange services, call Regional HIV/AIDS Connection, at 519 434-1601.
- Cover all cuts and sores. If you have bleeding cuts or sores on your hands don't prepare uncooked food (i.e. raw fruits and vegetables) for others.
- Throw away anything with your blood on it (e.g. tampons, dental floss, bandages, needles, broken glass). Avoid swimming in public pools if you have open cuts or sores.
- Clean up spills of your blood with freshly diluted household bleach (9 parts water to 1 part bleach). Let it stand for ten minutes before wiping it away. The bleach will kill any virus left on the surface. If other people must clean up your blood, they should wear protective gloves and wash their hands well after removing the gloves.
- If you are a health care worker or work in a high-risk setting, discuss your status in relation to your work with your health care provider and employer.
- Get tested for HIV and hepatitis C as well as testing for other sexually transmitted infections.
- Get tested for hepatitis A and get the hepatitis A vaccine if you are not protected/immune. The hepatitis A vaccine is free to anyone with hepatitis B infection. Talk with your doctor or come to the Middlesex-London Health Unit Immunization Clinic.
- Encourage your sex partner(s) and all the people you live with to get a hepatitis B test and to get hepatitis B vaccinations if the tests are negative. The hepatitis B vaccine is free to all people at risk (i.e. household/sex contacts of people infected with hepatitis B).

Pregnancy and hepatitis B

- If you are pregnant, a routine blood test is done to find out if you are a hepatitis B carrier.
- If you are negative for hepatitis B, and are involved in high-risk activities (eg. injection drug use, new sex partner, multiple sex partners), inform your doctor. Your doctor will retest you for hepatitis B infection later in your pregnancy.
- All babies born to mothers who are hepatitis B carriers receive hepatitis B immunoglobulin and vaccine within hours of being born. This is followed by two more hepatitis B vaccinations at one month and at six months of age. A blood test is done when the infant is 9-15 months old to make sure the infant has protection from hepatitis B and has not developed infection.

For more information contact, the Communicable Disease Division of the Middlesex-London Health Unit at 519 663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to www.healthunit.com

References:

Canadian Liver Foundation. (2012). Hepatitis B. Retrieved from <http://www.liver.ca/liver-disease/types/viral-hepatitis-a-b-c.aspx>

Heymann, D. (Ed). (2008). *Control of communicable diseases manual* (19th ed). Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.