

HEPATITIS B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious infection of the liver caused by a virus. The hepatitis B virus (HBV) may cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure, and death.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread by direct contact with the blood or sexual fluids of an infected person; for example, you can become infected by having sex or sharing needles with an infected person. A baby can get hepatitis B from an infected mother during childbirth. Hepatitis B is not spread through food or water, by kissing, or by casual contact.

Who is at risk for hepatitis B?

You are at high risk for getting hepatitis B if you:

1. have unprotected sex with someone infected with HBV
2. have unprotected sex with more than one partner
3. live in the same house with someone who has lifelong HBV infection
4. have a job that involves contact with human blood
5. use injection drugs
6. have hemophilia
7. travel to areas where hepatitis B is common
8. are an infant born to an infected mother or to immigrants from areas with high rates of HBV

What are symptoms of hepatitis B?

Symptoms include:

- jaundice (yellow coloring of skin and/or eyes)
- fatigue (extreme tiredness) leading to the inability to work for weeks or months
- possible fever
- loss of appetite
- nausea and vomiting
- abdominal pain
- joint pain

About 30% of people have no symptoms, and adults are more likely than children to show symptoms of HBV. Even if you have no symptoms, you can still spread the disease to other people.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within 60-90 days after exposure, with a range between 45-180 days.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

The virus is diagnosed based on blood tests.

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What is acute versus chronic hepatitis B?

Some people who are infected with HBV recover from the illness without lifelong effects – these people have acute HBV and are not infectious after the illness ends. However, some people never fully recover from the infection. They will carry the virus and can infect others for the rest of their lives - these people have chronic HBV. The younger you are when exposed to the virus, the more likely you are to develop chronic HBV. In the United States, more than 1 million people have chronic HBV.

How long is a person infectious (contagious)?

An infected person is contagious weeks before the onset of symptoms and throughout the entire acute illness, which could be months. Those who develop chronic hepatitis B are contagious for life.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis B?

For acute HBV, there is no specific treatment. For chronic HBV, several antiviral medications have been used effectively about 25 - 50% of the time. People ill with hepatitis B should avoid alcohol and drug use, and use medications (both prescription and non-prescription) only with the approval of their healthcare provider.

Is there a cure for hepatitis B?

There is no cure for hepatitis B. This is why prevention is so important. Hepatitis B vaccine is the best protection against HBV.

What is the hepatitis B vaccine?

Hepatitis B vaccine has been available since 1982. The vaccines are approved for all age groups and consist of three doses to complete the series. The vaccine is 80 – 100% effective after the series is completed.

Who should get vaccinated?

- all babies, beginning at birth
- all children 11-12 years of age who have not been vaccinated
- persons of any age whose behavior puts them at high risk for HBV infection
- persons whose jobs expose them to human blood

What should I do if I am exposed to hepatitis B?

Call your health care provider immediately. Treatment will vary depending on the type of exposure (i.e. sexual, needlestick) and immunization status of the contact. Usually, an immune globulin injection (HBIG) along with the HBV vaccine is given to persons who have been exposed to hepatitis B.

Hepatitis B is a reportable disease in Washington State, and acute cases must be reported to your local health department. In Snohomish County, contact Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response at 425.339.5278, Monday - Friday, 8 AM - 5 PM.