

*Hepatitis B is transmitted by sex and through blood-to-blood contact. It is prevented by immunisation, safe sex and safe injecting. People at higher risk should be vaccinated.*

## Hepatitis B

Last updated 25 March 2011

### What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that affects the liver. (Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver.)

### Are there any symptoms?

Many people who have hepatitis B don't notice any symptoms, or may have only mild symptoms that clear in a few weeks.

If there are symptoms, they usually develop within six to 12 weeks of infection and can include a mild flu-like illness, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, dark urine, fatigue, general aches and pains, and yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice). These symptoms last from days to a few weeks.

### Does hepatitis B get better by itself?

Most adults who get hepatitis B recover or 'clear' the infection. They are no longer infectious, and have lifelong immunity.

However, about five to 10 people in every 100 infected do not clear the virus, and remain infectious for many years. They have chronic hepatitis B infection.

Children infected at birth are less likely to clear the infection and more likely to develop chronic Hepatitis B.

People with chronic hepatitis B may look and feel well, but the infection can still be transmitted to others. Chronic hepatitis B infection slowly damages the liver, so a small number of people with this condition may eventually suffer liver failure or cancer of the liver.

### How is it transmitted?

The hepatitis B virus is transmitted in body fluids (blood, semen, saliva or vaginal fluid) from an infected person when the virus enters the blood stream of another person. This can occur in different ways:

- mother to child transmission during pregnancy or childbirth – most people in Australia with chronic hepatitis B have had it since birth
- unprotected sex
- any form of skin penetration with unsterile equipment, including sharing needles, syringes and other equipment for injecting drugs; needle stick injuries; tattooing; acupuncture and body piercing
- sharing toothbrushes, razors, sex toys or other items that may have blood on them
- if blood from an infected person makes direct contact with an open wound of another person

Hepatitis B is **not** transmitted by casual contact such as hugging or holding hands, kissing on the cheek, coughing or sneezing, sharing food, or sharing eating utensils such as spoons or chopsticks.

### How is it prevented?

The best way to prevent the spread of hepatitis B is to get vaccinated. The vaccination consists of 3 injections over 6 months. It is safe and reliable. Hepatitis B is now part of the infant vaccination program, and in NSW young people at high school are being vaccinated. Hepatitis B vaccination is available for adults and children from local doctors. It is also available free at sexual health clinics and other venues for people at higher risk of infection such as Aboriginal people, men who have sex with men or those who have partners with hepatitis B.

To reduce the risk of transmission, it is important:

- not to share injecting equipment
- not to share razors, toothbrushes, sex toys and other personal items
- to use condoms during sex
- to use gloves to dress wounds and to clean up spills of blood and other body fluids
- to avoid oral sex where blood is present (menstruation, gum disease, herpes, cold sores, cuts)

If you are not immune to Hepatitis B, Immunoglobulin injections may help prevent infection if given soon after exposure (see below).

Go for a regular check-up to find infections before complications develop and to prevent transmission to others. Always use condoms and don't share injecting equipment.

### How is it diagnosed?

Hepatitis B is detected by a blood test. This can show if a person has a recent infection, has a chronic infection or has had hepatitis B in the past but is no longer infectious. Blood tests can also check for damage to the liver.

### How is it treated?

If you have been exposed to hepatitis B, see your doctor immediately. An injection of a drug called *immunoglobulin* can be given after hepatitis B exposure that may prevent the infection taking hold. The injection should be given within 72 hours of a needle stick injury and within 14 days after a possible sexual exposure.

People in the initial stages of infection need to rest, drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol and other drugs. If a person continues to have hepatitis B after six months the infection is considered to be chronic.

There are treatments available to help manage certain cases of chronic hepatitis B. Depending on your blood results, your doctor may refer you to a specialist to discuss treatment.

### Telling partners

Hepatitis B can be infectious for 6 months before the symptoms are noticeable. If you have hepatitis B it is important to tell anyone who you know may also have been at risk, so that they can be treated with immunoglobulin if appropriate, and get tested themselves. This helps stop the spread of the virus. Your doctor can help you decide who may be at risk and help you to contact them.

Hepatitis B is a notifiable disease. This means that doctors and laboratory staff are legally required to tell NSW Health about new cases. This information is confidential and is used for public health planning.

The information in this fact sheet is general and you should see a doctor if you are worried about your health.

### Contact

NSW Sexual Health Infoline freecall **1800 451 624**.