

Hepatitis B

What you need to know

hepatitis
australia



Info line 1300 437 222

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What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that can cause damage to the liver. It is sometimes also called “hep B” or “HBV”. Two billion people worldwide have been exposed to hep B and up to 160,000 people in Australia have chronic hep B. Hepatitis B is different to HIV/AIDS or hepatitis A, C, D or E.

How do you get hep B?

Hep B is in all body fluids but it is spread through direct blood and unprotected sexual contact. You can get hep B from:

- Mother to child during pregnancy/birth
- Not using a condom during sex (vaginal or anal sex)
- Sharing drug injecting equipment (including syringes, spoons, water, filters and tourniquets)
- Unsterile cultural or traditional practises that involve blood or skin penetration
- Sharing toothbrushes, razors and tweezers
- Unsterile tattooing or piercing
- Blood-to-blood contact through open wounds
- Needlestick injuries (getting hep B this way is rare)
- Oral sex when there are open cuts, ulcers or sores in the mouth
- Contaminated blood transfusions, blood products, medical or dental equipment (this is an issue in some developing countries but is very rare in Australia)

It is safe to share things like food, eating utensils, cups and plates. You cannot get hep B from hugging, kissing, sneezing, mosquitoes, from crying, pets, or sharing toilets or showers. It is safe to breast-feed (unless nipples are cracked or bleeding). Babies should also be vaccinated at birth.



How can you prevent getting hep B?

- Get vaccinated. This is the best prevention
- Avoid blood-to-blood contact
- If you have hep B and are pregnant, talk to your doctor about vaccinations and hepatitis B immunoglobulin (HBIG) for your baby that must be given within 12 hours of birth
- Practise safe sex and use a condom
- Never share drug injecting equipment (including needles, water, spoons, filters and tourniquets) and dispose of these safely
- Cover open wounds or cuts with bandaids and clean up any blood spills with disposable gloves and bleach

- Always get your tattoos and piercings done by a professional who uses sterile equipment
- Don't share items that may have traces of blood on them like tweezers, razors or toothbrushes
- It is safe to breast feed but if your nipples are cracked or bleeding you should stop breast-feeding temporarily
- If you are not immunised and you have sexual or blood contact with someone that may have hepatitis B, you should talk to your doctor (GP) or clinic about getting vaccinated and HBIG (hepatitis B immunoglobulin). HBIG can help your body fight hep B if you have just been exposed to the virus. You should get the HBIG injection within 72 hours of contact with blood, and within 14 days for sexual contact.

Is there a hep B vaccination?

Yes! There are safe and easy vaccinations for hepatitis B and A that can prevent you from getting these viruses. You can get vaccinations from most Sexual Health Clinics, Family Planning Clinics and Aboriginal Medical Services or see your doctor (GP). At some places vaccinations are free, at other places there is a charge. Your local Hepatitis Council can tell you more information about vaccinations or where to go. For adults there are 3 vaccine injections given several months apart. To make sure the vaccination is effective, it is important that you have all the injections. Most people with a healthy immune system will respond to the vaccination and become immune to hepatitis B. Once you are immune, you cannot get hep B and you do not require any booster shots.



How do you know if you have hep B?

A blood test can show if you have had hepatitis B in the past, or if you have it now. To get tested or find out more information, contact your local doctor (GP), Sexual Health Clinic, Family Planning Clinic or Aboriginal Medical Service, or see our contact details at the end of this brochure for more information.

What will happen to me if I have hep B?

If you have hepatitis B for less than 6 months, it is called 'acute'. If you have it for longer than 6 months, it is called 'chronic'. What happens when you are exposed to hepatitis B depends on how old you are when you get it.

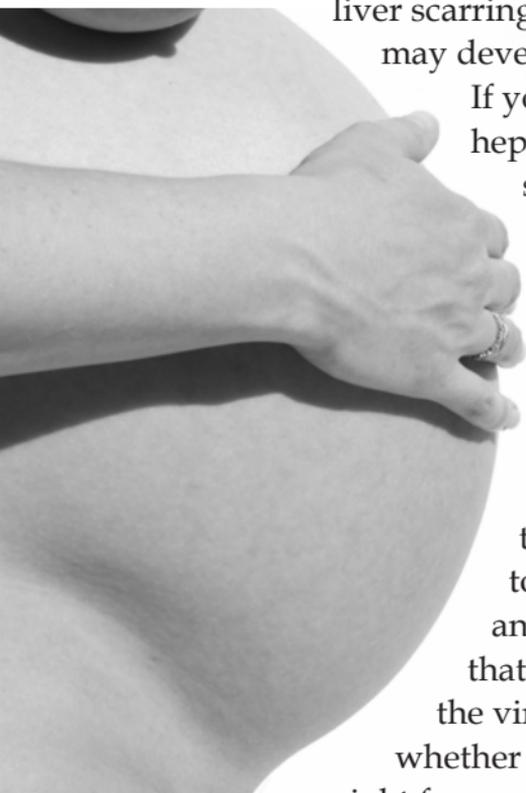
95% of adults who get acute hepatitis B will clear the virus and not develop chronic hepatitis B. This means your immune system will fight the virus and get rid of it from your body. You will no longer experience symptoms; you will not be able to pass hepatitis B to other people and will be immune to hepatitis B in the future.

However, 90% of new-born babies who have hepatitis B will go on to have chronic hepatitis B. This is because the baby's immune system is not yet mature and doesn't recognise the hepatitis B virus as

something it should try and remove from the body. The risk of getting hep B can be reduced by giving the baby vaccination and HBIG at birth.

If you have hepatitis B for longer than 6 months and develop 'chronic' hepatitis B, it is important to look after yourself. 30% of people with hepatitis B may develop liver scarring ('cirrhosis'). 5-10% may develop liver cancer.

If you have chronic hepatitis B you may still feel well and not notice any symptoms. So it is important to have regular check ups with your doctor (GP) and liver specialist. There are treatments available to manage hepatitis B and other medications that can sometimes make the virus inactive. Discuss whether treatment would be right for you and find information about healthy living. Your diet and exercise, and the amount of alcohol you drink, can have a huge impact on how hepatitis B affects you.



What are the symptoms of hep B?

It is important to remember that many people with hep B don't experience any symptoms at all. However, as your immune system reacts to the virus you may feel unwell and experience symptoms such as feeling sick, tiredness, fever, dark urine, joint or stomach pain, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes) or loss of appetite.

Is there a treatment for hep B?

Yes, some people with chronic (long-term) hepatitis B may benefit from treatment to reduce the chance of getting liver scarring (cirrhosis) or liver cancer.

One type of treatment is Pegylated Interferon. This medication is injected weekly for up to one year and may have some side effects. Pegylated Interferon aims to boost the immune system and make the virus inactive. This is also known as remission. If your hep B is inactive you will be much less likely to have any further health problems from the virus. In rare cases, however, hep B can reactivate. So it is very important, whether you have active or inactive hepatitis B, that you stay in contact with your specialist or doctor (GP) and have regular blood tests to check your liver health.

The other type of treatment is anti-viral medications. These are sometimes called nucleoside analogues, or nucleotide analogues. These tablets work by slowing down the reproduction of the virus, helping to protect the liver from more damage. These tablets are taken long-term and should never be stopped without medical advice. Sometimes anti-viral medications may not work as well as they did when you first started. This is also called resistance.

Ask your doctor (GP) for a referral to a liver specialist to discuss whether treatment is right for you, and what type of treatment this should be.

How do I look after myself if I have hep B?

- Stay in regular contact with your liver specialist or doctor (GP)
- Avoid drinking alcohol, or drink less. Alcohol can increase your chances of developing liver scarring or cancer
- Eat a balanced healthy diet
- Get regular exercise
- Reduce your stress
- Try to maintain a healthy body weight
- Manage your stress, get support, and rest as much as you need to

Some people find that alternative or complementary therapies like massage, acupuncture and herbs such as milk thistle can improve the quality of their life and



reduce symptoms. However, there are many herbs that are potentially dangerous to the liver. These include: black cohosh, bayberry, skullcap and valerian. Some herbs may also interact with other medications. Make sure you see a natural therapist who has experience with treating hepatitis and consult with your doctor (GP) about complementary therapies. Contact your local Hepatitis Council or visit www.hepatitisaustralia.com for more information on complementary therapies.

Do I have to tell anyone that I have hep B?

Generally speaking you are not legally required to tell anybody that you have hepatitis B. In fact, if you have hepatitis B you are protected under the Disability Discrimination Act (1992). However, you are required to tell someone you have hep B:

1. If your job involves doing what are called 'invasive or exposure-prone procedures', for example if you are a doctor or dentist performing surgeries

2. If you wanted to donate blood, blood products or semen
3. If you want to join the Australian Defence Force
4. For insurance and superannuation purposes
5. Generally the legal requirements around disclosure vary across the country. In some states you may be required to inform partners if you know you have hepatitis B prior to sex (contact your local health department for more information).

Telling somebody can be overwhelming. Generally speaking, the decision who to tell and when, is up to you. Before you do, learn the facts about hep B so you are well-informed. You can tell the people you live with that a safe and effective vaccination is available. The vaccination is recommended for anyone who lives with or is a sexual partner of someone that has hep B. Provide them with a copy of this brochure and encourage them to contact your local Hepatitis Council for further information and support.

The most important thing to remember is to look after yourself, ask questions and be informed.

Who can I speak to if I want to know more about hep B?

For more information about hepatitis B treatment, the different tests available, and living with hep B, visit the Hepatitis Australia website at www.hepatitisaustralia.com.

The State and Territory Hepatitis Councils are all able to provide a limited information and referral service for hepatitis B. Some of these Councils are equipped to provide a more comprehensive service. Contact your closest Hepatitis Council on 1300 HEP ABC or 1300 437 222

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