

Hepatitis B Fact Sheet

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that may damage the liver over time. Hepatitis B can be a serious condition, but it is treatable, manageable, and most importantly, preventable.

How is hepatitis B transmitted?

Hepatitis B is transmitted through blood and sexual fluids. Hepatitis B cannot be passed on through other body fluids, such as saliva.

Hepatitis B can be transmitted through unprotected sex due to the presence of the virus in semen and vaginal fluids. It is also passed on through risky behaviours related to blood to blood contact, such as

- Sharing drug injecting equipment (including filters, spoons, and even tourniquets).
- Sharing other drug using equipment such as 'crack pipes' and straws.
- Unsterile tattooing or body piercing.
- Sharing household hygiene items that contain infected blood, such as toothbrushes, razors, and nail clippers.
- Blood to blood contact in sporting situations.
- Blood to blood contact as a result of fighting or violence.
- Rituals involving blood (such as 'blood brothers').
- Sharing instruments for branding or scarification.
- Receiving a blood transfusion before 1990.
- Mother to baby through birth (the screening of pregnant women will help to reduce the risk).
- Working in a blood exposure prone occupation.
- Giving first aid without appropriate safety equipment.
- Needle stick injuries.
- Cleaning up blood spills.

The hepatitis B virus is invisible to the naked eye, and is found in blood and plasma (which is usually clear). It is possible for the virus to live on a surface outside the body for many days.

It is important to understand how we don't get hepatitis B. Behaviours such as kissing, hugging, holding/shaking hands, sharing cups, plates, food, and drinks are extremely unlikely to pass on the virus. It is not transmitted from toilets seats, or mosquito bites.

The best way for a person to stay safe against hepatitis B is to get vaccinated. There is a safe and effective vaccine available that will ensure most people are immune to hepatitis B for life. In Australia, the vaccine is offered to children at birth, and is free for people in certain circumstances. To find out more, see the HepatitisWA hepatitis A/B vaccination fact sheet, or contact HepatitisWA or your local General Practitioner (GP).

How will someone know if they have hepatitis B?

It may be difficult for someone to know whether or not they are living with hepatitis B. Most people living with hepatitis B will look and feel well for many years before long term symptoms become noticeable. At any time of infection, people may not experience any symptoms at all, or if they do, they experience symptoms which may go unnoticed such as:

- Nausea
- Fever
- Tiredness
- Loss Of Appetite
- Abdominal Discomfort
- Jaundice

Many people do not link these symptoms to hepatitis B. The long term symptoms of a chronic (lifelong) hepatitis B infection may not present until the liver starts to become damaged, which is often many years later (on average 15 to 20 years). Unfortunately, this means that many people living with hepatitis B may not realise they are living with it. The only way to be absolutely sure is to have a hepatitis B antibody test which is available through a GP.

How serious is hepatitis B?

A chronic hepatitis B infection has the potential to be very serious, and over time may lead to significant liver damage such as cirrhosis or liver cancer.

However, ninety five percent (95%) of adults who come in contact with the virus are capable of clearing the virus from their body naturally. In this case a person will no longer have the virus, and they will become immune to the virus. Children are much less likely to clear the virus, with approximately ten percent (10%) of infants able to do so.

Approximately five percent (5%) of adults will not clear the virus naturally and will go on to have a chronic infection. If a person develops a chronic infection, the virus may slowly damage the liver over many years, perhaps leading to advanced liver damage. Often, this will result in a reduction in energy levels and compromise the overall quality of life. However, some people may live with the virus for decades without developing any liver damage at all, or only very mild levels of damage.

What can someone do if they have hepatitis B?

The best way to manage the impact of hepatitis B is to pay close attention to diet and lifestyle. There are many other things that can damage the liver such as alcohol, drugs, chemicals/toxins, and fatty foods. These things should be avoided if living with chronic hepatitis B. Having a low fat diet, drinking lots of water, and regular exercise can also make a big difference. It is recommended that people living with viral hepatitis consult with their GP and monitor their condition on a regular basis.

There is also an effective treatment for hepatitis B. The hepatitis B treatment will not eradicate, or cure the virus, rather, the treatment is designed to modify the impact of the virus and minimise the damage to the liver. As the virus varies its activity, it is important that people living with hepatitis B have regular blood tests to find out when treatment is necessary. To find out more about the treatment, contact HepatitisWA and speak to our Support Officer, or visit your local GP.