

# Understanding Hepatitis B

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Hepatitis means infection and/or inflammation of the liver. It can damage and destroy the liver, thus affecting its ability to regulate many important body functions such as storage and release of sugar, detoxification of drugs, production of bile for digestion, and breakdown of protein, fats, and carbohydrates.

Hepatitis can be caused by different types of viruses. Types: A, B, C, D, and E. Hepatitis B is a liver infection caused by the type B virus and is generally the most serious form of the disease. In some patients, Hepatitis B can develop into cirrhosis (scarring of liver tissue) or cancer of the liver.

## How is Hepatitis B transmitted?

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The virus is present in the blood and body fluids (semen, vaginal secretions, saliva, sweat, tears, and breast milk) of the infected person. It can only be spread by contact with the infected blood or body fluids in the following ways:

- Sexual contact
- Mother to baby during the birthing process
- Open wounds or breaks in skin
- Use of unsterilized needles (acupuncture, tattooing, ear-piercing, and I.V drug abuse)
- Sharing of razors, toothbrushes, nail files/clippers, scissors, or other personal items that are contaminated with infected blood

After exposure to the Hepatitis B virus, infection follows an uncertain course: you may or may not become infected. You may have symptoms and recover; or you may be symptom-free at first, but develop problems with your liver later on. In some cases, you may become a "chronic" or long-term carrier of the disease.

## What is a Hepatitis B carrier?

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A carrier is a person who has Hepatitis B virus in his or her blood even after all symptoms have disappeared. A carrier can spread the disease to another person through the above stated ways. A carrier may or may not have symptoms. In many cases, if carriers do not know that they are carriers of the virus, they can be more dangerous to others because the disease is transmitted silently. **The Hepatitis B carrier can be recognized by a simple specific blood test called the hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) test.**

## What are the symptoms of Hepatitis B?

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Symptoms may be mild or absent. They may appear several weeks to months after exposure. Common symptoms include:

- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Mild fever
- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhea
- Muscle or joint pains
- Nausea
- Dark urine
- Vomiting
- Skin rashes
- Jaundice (yellowish skin and eyes)

## Treatment for Hepatitis B

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- Bed rest
- A well-balanced diet
- Avoidance of alcohol and certain drugs that may be harmful to your liver
- Oral medications (pills) or a course of Interferon injections may be used to treat persons with **chronic** hepatitis B

## **Prevention of Hepatitis B**

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Avoid contact with infected blood or body fluids:

- Wash hands thoroughly after contact with contaminated items
- Wear condoms during sexual contact
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, needles, scissors, nail files, or contaminated personal items
- Cover cuts and wound with bandages
- Be vaccinated against Hepatitis B. This is recommended for all newborns, children, and persons who are at risk. Vaccination is safe; **you cannot get Hepatitis from the vaccine**. Possible side effects from the vaccination include soreness at the injection site and mild fever.

## **Who should be vaccinated?**

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- Persons born or raised in countries where Hepatitis B infection is common, e.g. China, Southeast Asia, Africa
- Persons in close contact with a chronic carrier
- All newborns
- Persons with multiple sex partners
- Sexually active gay men
- Health care workers
- Patients receiving kidney dialysis, treatment for blood clotting disorders, or acupuncture treatments
- Intravenous drug abusers
- Persons who travel to or live in parts of the world where Hepatitis B is common

## **Why should the baby of a carrier mother be vaccinated?**

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The baby generally does not contract Hepatitis B in the womb because the placenta usually prevents the virus from passing into the baby's bloodstream. The baby is exposed to the virus upon entering the birth canal of the infected mother. If the mother does not know that she is infected and the child does not receive Hepatitis B immunization on time, the child could later become a Hepatitis B carrier and

could develop serious liver disease: chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis, or liver cancer.

Since 1993, all babies born in the United States are required by law to receive the hepatitis B vaccination in order to be fully protected against the disease. Therefore, it is important for all mothers to keep those vaccination appointments for their children.

Ask your doctor or visit your local health clinic if you wish to know more about Hepatitis B. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure! This statement is especially true in the prevention of Hepatitis B.

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