



# Hepatitis B

## What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis is a general term used to describe inflammation of the liver. A variety of viruses and other substances, such as alcohol, can cause hepatitis. The hepatitis B virus causes the infection known as hepatitis B.

## How is it spread?

The virus is spread through direct contact with infected blood, blood products, semen, vaginal fluids and saliva. The virus can be passed on by:

- sharing injecting equipment
- mother to baby at or around birth
- child to child through contact between open sores or wounds
- sexual intercourse
- biohazard injury

## What are the symptoms?



The symptoms generally develop 2-3 months after infection, but may develop from 6 weeks to 6 months after infection.



The symptoms may include mild fever, tiredness, lack of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, muscle and joint pain, rash, dark urine and pale faeces, and yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice). Jaundice may be difficult to see in dark skinned people.



The symptoms are generally more severe in adults than children. Many children will not show any sign of the infection or just have a mild illness.



## Acute and Chronic Infection

After the initial acute infection, some people continue to have the hepatitis B virus in their bodies. If the virus remains in the body 6 months after the acute infection, these people are said to have a chronic infection and are sometimes known as 'carriers'. Chronic infection can be determined by a blood test. After a person has recovered from hepatitis B, they cannot get it again.

Up to 90% of babies infected at birth will become carriers while only 5% to 10% of those infected as adults will become carriers. A small proportion of carriers will clear the virus from their body after a few years.

Carriers often have no symptoms but are able to spread the infection to other people. They also have an increased risk of developing scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) and liver cancer later in life.

## What is the infectious period?

Infected people can pass the virus to others from several weeks before they become ill and during the acute part of the illness. As chronic carriers do not clear the hepatitis B virus from their system following recovery from their acute infection they continue to be infectious to others.

## What is the treatment?

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B. Medication may be prescribed for people with chronic hepatitis B infection.



## How can hepatitis B be prevented?

Hepatitis B can be prevented by:

- vaccination (vaccination of all infants at birth is now recommended)
- treating the babies of carrier mothers with immunoglobulin
- never sharing injecting drug equipment
- avoiding biohazard injuries
- wearing protective gloves, clothing and face shield when handling blood or body fluids
- practising safe sex
- not sharing personal items such as razors and toothbrushes
- having any tattooing/body art performed by a registered tattooist

## Hepatitis B vaccination

Hepatitis B vaccination is part of the national recommended childhood vaccination schedule. In the Northern Territory the injection is given at birth, 2, 4 and 6 months of age.

Vaccination for adults is a series of 3 injections over a 6 month period. A combined hepatitis A and B vaccine is available and may be appropriate for people at risk of both infections.

Vaccination is also recommended for non vaccinated adults who are:

- household contacts of a person with hepatitis B
- sexual partners of a person with hepatitis B
- injecting drug users
- haemodialysis patients
- recipients of certain blood products
- hepatitis C antibody positive and/or have chronic liver disease

- HIV positive
- at increased sexual risk of infection
- residents and staff of facilities for persons with intellectual disabilities
- inmates and staff of long term correctional facilities
- health care workers and embalmers

Pre and post vaccination blood tests are only recommended for certain groups. Booster doses are generally not recommended.

## What happens to those exposed to hepatitis B?

The best control of hepatitis B will be through universal vaccination. However, when an individual is exposed to the hepatitis B virus (eg via a biohazard injury or sexual partner found to have hepatitis B) a blood test to determine that individual's immune status should be taken.

Based on the results of the blood test the person may be offered immunoglobulin and/or vaccination. Immunoglobulin is not a vaccine, but is an injection that may prevent infection if given within 72 hours of exposure to the virus.

People with hepatitis B do not need to be excluded from work, school or sport. Those with chronic infection will require ongoing follow-up.

## For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control

Darwin	8922 8044
Clinic 34	8999 2678
Alice Springs	8951 7549
Katherine	8973 9049
Nhulunbuy	8987 0359
Tennant Creek	8962 4259