

FACT SHEET

Hepatitis B

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. The virus, which is called hepatitis B virus (HBV), can cause short-term illness or life-long infection, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, liver failure and death.

How is it spread?

The most common way the disease is spread is through unprotected sexual contact, sharing needles used for injecting drugs or medication, or accidental needle sticks among health care workers. The virus is in blood, semen, and vaginal fluids. When one of these infected fluids contacts mucous membranes (soft wet surfaces of the body) or enters through breaks in the skin, the virus may be passed to another person. Mothers can also pass it to infants at birth.

What are the symptoms?

On average, symptoms begin three months after the virus enters the body and usually last for several weeks. Symptoms may include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting

- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Clay-colored stool
- Joint pain
- Jaundice

How can it be prevented?

There is a vaccine to help prevent hepatitis B infection. The vaccine is safe and effective and is routinely given to infants with their baby shots.

Individuals should also avoid direct contact with another person's blood or body fluids. If contact occurs, wash up immediately. Don't share toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers or other personal items which may become contaminated with blood.

How is it treated?

While there is no cure for hepatitis B infection, there are some effective treatments available. If you have been exposed to hepatitis B and have not been vaccinated, then hepatitis B immune globulin should be given immediately.

It is important to see a doctor throughout the course of the infection. The doctor can also recommend symptomatic measures such as rest, change in diet, etc.

This fact sheet is for informational purposes only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.

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