

# Hepatitis B

## What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that can cause infections in humans. It usually infects the liver and causes inflammation. Inflammation is when the body produces cells to fight an infection. This inflammation can cause swelling of the liver and long-term can cause cirrhosis or scarring of the liver.

## What happens if I get exposed to hepatitis B?

This is called the **natural history** of hepatitis B. When someone first gets exposed to hepatitis B, the virus gets into the bloodstream and goes to the liver. Dependent upon the age when the infection first occurs, there may be no symptoms or there may be symptoms of **jaundice** (yellowing of the skin and eyes), nausea with vomiting, fatigue, diarrhea, fever, joint pain, rash, or belly pain. These symptoms can be severe and may last for 1-2 weeks or many months. The older persons are when they get infected, the more likely they are to feel sick. Newborns infected at birth rarely are sick at that time.

If an infant is exposed at birth to hepatitis B (from the mother), the infant should be given a hepatitis B vaccine and a medicine called **HBIG** (Hepatitis B Immunoglobulin). If not treated after birth, there is a 90% chance the baby will end up with chronic hepatitis B, meaning he/she will be infected for life. If adolescents or adults are exposed to hepatitis B, there is only a 5% chance it will stay with them for life and a 95% chance they will clear the infection on their own.

With chronic hepatitis, the liver can swell because of the inflammation. About 10-20% of people with chronic hepatitis B will develop complications outside the liver, such as problems with their kidneys. The hepatitis B can also cause **cirrhosis** (scarring or fibrosis of the liver) with time. It usually takes several years for this to occur; this occurs faster in people who also have HIV. If someone develops cirrhosis, there is a small chance that he/she may develop cancer of the liver called **hepatocellular carcinoma** (HCC). Patients with cirrhosis often feel sick and have many problems, such as swelling of the stomach or legs, shortness of breath, bleeding from the anus or vomiting of blood, jaundice, or tiredness and fatigue. Eventually your liver can die from the cirrhosis.

## How did I get infected with hepatitis B? Can I pass it to other people?

Hepatitis B is passed from person-to-person by exposure to blood or body fluids or during pregnancy and delivery. The most common way it is passed is sexual exposure but it can also occur by sharing needles or getting a blood transfusion (very rare nowadays). Using drugs and sharing needles can pass the infection; getting a tattoo with an unclean needle or sharing a toothbrush or razor can also pass the infection, since blood may be present, and it can live for a long time. A mother with chronic hepatitis B has about a 90% chance of infecting her baby during delivery if untreated. People with close personal contact and household members of an infected person are also at risk of infection.

If you have chronic hepatitis B, you should not donate blood or organs or sperm, or share needles, razors, drug "works", nail clippers, or toothbrushes with anyone else. Sexual partners and household members should be vaccinated and you should use condoms for vaginal or anal sex to prevent infections. If you are pregnant, your baby's doctor needs to know you have chronic hepatitis B.

**If you have further questions, be sure to talk to your primary care provider or your health educator or nurse.**



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