

HEPATITIS B

What is Hepatitis B?

- Hepatitis means inflammation (pain and swelling) of the liver.
- Hepatitis can be caused by chemicals, drugs, drinking too much alcohol or viruses.
- Hepatitis B is caused by the hepatitis B virus. It occurs more commonly in southeast Asia and parts of Africa.
- Some people who are infected will clear the virus from their body, and develop life long immunity. These people can no longer pass on hepatitis B to other people.
- Other people stay infected with hepatitis B, and some of these people get liver damage or liver cancer many years later. These people, called 'carriers', can also pass on the virus to other people.

What are the symptoms?

Many people have no symptoms when they first catch hepatitis B. Symptoms may include:

- Jaundice (the skin and whites of the eyes become yellow)
- Dark urine
- Pale faeces
- Tiredness
- Abdominal pain
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea & vomiting
- Joint pain.

How does someone catch Hepatitis B?

The hepatitis B virus is in the blood, liver and body fluids of an infected person.

The virus may spread to the baby of a woman carrier of hepatitis B during pregnancy or birth. In Australia all babies are vaccinated against hepatitis B after birth.

The hepatitis B virus can also be spread by:

- Unclean equipment used for injections, operations, removal of teeth, or tattooing.
- A blood transfusion which contains hepatitis B virus. Blood used for transfusions in Australia is tested for hepatitis B.
- Using personal items like razors and toothbrushes (which may have blood on them) belonging to someone with hepatitis B.
- Sexual activity with an infected person when a condom is not used.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

- A blood test can tell if you have been infected with hepatitis B virus in the past.
- A blood test can also tell whether you have cleared the virus from your body. Hepatitis B antibodies (from proteins that fight infection) will still be in your blood even if you have cleared the virus.
- If the test shows that you are still a carrier of hepatitis B, your doctor may do another test and refer you to a specialist doctor or clinic.

How is hepatitis B treated?

- Treatment aims to clear hepatitis B from your body. The treatment is usually arranged by special liver clinics.

If you have hepatitis B you will feel better if you:

- Avoid drinking alcohol
- Eat a well-balanced, low fat diet
- Do regular exercise
- Rest when you are tired.

It is important to have regular checkups with your family doctor.

How can someone avoid catching hepatitis B?

- Always use condoms with new sexual partners or with people who are not vaccinated against hepatitis B.
- Do not share needles, syringes or injecting drug use equipment.
- Do not share tooth brushes or razors.
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis B if you do not have immunity. People who live with a person with hepatitis B can get free hepatitis B vaccination from their family doctor.
- Babies born to mothers who are carriers, can receive extra protection with an injection of hepatitis B immunoglobulin after birth.

Further information is available from