



HEPATITIS B

What is HEPATITIS B?

Hepatitis B (formerly known as serum Hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by the Hepatitis B Virus. The disease affects between 140,000 and 320,000 persons per year in the United States.

Who gets Hepatitis B?

Anyone can get Hepatitis B, but those at greatest risk include:

- Babies born to mothers who are infectious with Hepatitis B (including carriers);
- Clients in mental health institutions;
- Injection drug users (or persons who share needles);
- Persons in occupations where there is contact with infected blood and other infectious body fluids, which include saliva (persons who work in settings such as health care facilities, first responders, etc.);
- Sexually active homosexual and bisexual men;
- Anyone with multiple sex partners;
- Men and women who have a recent diagnosis of another sexually transmitted disease;
- Hemodialysis patients;
- Persons who receive unscreened blood products;
- Certain household contacts of an infected person;
- Household contacts and sexual partners of Hepatitis B carriers;
- Inmates of long term correctional facilities;
- Persons from countries where Hepatitis B is widespread (areas of Asia and Africa); and
- Persons in the United States who are Alaskan Natives or Pacific Islanders.

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis B can be found in the blood of infected persons. It is also present in lesser amounts in semen, vaginal secretions, amniotic fluid, body fluids containing blood, body organs, and saliva. Hepatitis B is spread through sexual contact (homosexual and heterosexual), needle sharing, needle stick injury, mucous membrane exposure, and direct contact with infected body fluids. There appears to be no transmission of Hepatitis B via tears, sweat, urine, and stool or droplet nuclei (airborne). Hepatitis B is not spread by casual contact.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis B?

Many persons with Hepatitis B infection have no symptoms at all, or they may be mild and flu-like (i.e., loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and fatigue). Some patients may notice darkened urine (iced tea colored), light-colored stools or yellowed skin and eyes (jaundice). A few persons will experience a more severe disease syndrome and may die from liver failure.



How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may occur as early as 60 days to as long as 150 days following exposure. On average, symptoms appear between 60-90 days. The variation in time for onset of symptoms is related to the amount of virus transmitted at the time of exposure.

How is Hepatitis B diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on a combination of clinical and laboratory findings. Because many persons infected with Hepatitis B have no symptoms or present with symptoms similar to many other diseases, definitive diagnosis is dependent on laboratory tests. Additionally, due to the fact that there are several types of viral Hepatitis, a blood test is needed to confirm which type of Hepatitis is present.

How long is a person able to spread the virus?

The virus can be present in blood and other body fluids several weeks before symptoms appear and generally for several months afterward. About one in 10 adults and three of 10 children with Hepatitis B will go on to become ongoing carriers of the virus for the rest of their lives, even when they do not have symptoms. As long as the virus is present, it can spread to others. Persons with Hepatitis B infection should not donate blood, body organs or tissues.

What is the treatment for Hepatitis B?

There are no special medicines to treat a person with acute Hepatitis B. Generally, rest and supportive treatment is all that is needed. Alpha-interferon is the most effective treatment for chronic Hepatitis B infections and is successful in 25 percent to 50 percent of cases.

What precautions should Hepatitis B carriers take?

Hepatitis B carriers should practice good hygiene so that close contacts are not directly exposed to their blood or other body fluids. Carriers should not share razors, toothbrushes or any other object that may become contaminated with blood. In addition, household members, particularly sexual partners, should be immunized with Hepatitis B vaccine. Carriers should practice "safe sex" if their partners are not immunized. It is important for carriers to inform their dentists and other health care providers of their carrier state.

Can Hepatitis B be prevented?

Yes, a vaccine to prevent Hepatitis B has been available since 1982. The Hepatitis B vaccine is safe and effective and is usually given as 3 or 4 shots over a 6 month period. The vaccine is recommended for all newborns, all children and adolescents through 18 years of age who did not receive the vaccine when they were younger; and all unvaccinated adults at risk for Hepatitis B infection. A special Hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) is also available for people who are not vaccinated and are exposed to the virus. If you are exposed to Hepatitis B, consult your health care provider immediately.