

# HEPATITIS B – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

## How do you get hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is spread through blood-to-blood contact and through sexual fluids (semen and vaginal fluids). Hepatitis B can be transmitted by:

- vertical transmission (from mother with hepatitis B to baby during birth)
- having unprotected sex (sex without a condom)
- having unprotected oral sex when there are open cuts, ulcers or sores in the mouth
- blood transfusions (performed in Australia before 1990 or currently overseas in countries that don't screen blood products)
- traditional or cultural ceremonies and blood rituals (using unsterilised equipment)
- occupational needle stick injury
- injecting drug use (sharing needles, filters, spoons, tourniquets or swabs)
- tattooing and body piercing (using unsterilised equipment)
- sharing personal grooming items (e.g. toothbrushes, razors or tweezers)

Hepatitis B is not transmitted by social contact. Things such as sharing food, utensils, cups, plates, hugging, shaking hands, kissing, sneezing, tears, mosquitoes, pets, sharing toilets or showers cannot transmit hepatitis B.

## Is there a Vaccination for Hepatitis B?

Yes and the vaccination is safe and effective. You will need three injections over 6 months. You then require a blood test 4 weeks after your last injection to make sure that the vaccine has worked. All three

injections give you the best chance of developing and immunity (protection). If the vaccine has worked, you are protected for life.

## How do I get tested for Hepatitis B?

A blood test is the only way to know if you have hepatitis B and it can show if you have had hepatitis B in the past, or if you have it now. To get blood tests for Hepatitis B you can see your GP, Aboriginal Medical Service or a liver clinic.

## What will happen to me if I have hepatitis B?

If you contract hepatitis B as an adult, in 95% of cases you will clear the virus and not develop chronic hepatitis B. This means your immune system will fight the virus and get rid of it from your body. However, if a baby contracts the virus there is a 90% chance that they will go on to have chronic hepatitis B. This is because the baby's immune system is not yet mature and doesn't recognise the virus as something it should try and remove from the body.

## Is there treatment available for hepatitis B?

Yes, there is treatment (antiviral therapy) available for hepatitis B. However, there are a lot of factors which impact on whether you will need to start antiviral therapy. It is very important that you see your doctor or liver specialist regularly for monitoring – usually every six months

## Why is monitoring so important?

Sometimes you may not know that damage is happening to your liver because you don't feel sick. Hepatitis B can progress to cirrhosis (liver scarring),

liver cancer and liver failure, so knowing what is happening in your liver is important. The earlier that changes are detected, the more options that may be available to you.

### How often should I have a checkup?

Hepatitis B can change over time and you could be at risk of developing cirrhosis or liver cancer. This makes it important that you see your doctor or liver specialist regularly, usually every six months. Keep a diary of your appointments and remember to tell your doctor or liver clinic if you change your phone number or postal address.

### Can I share medication?

Medicines for hepatitis B should **never be** shared. If anyone else you know also has hepatitis B encourage them to see their doctor or liver specialist. If you stop or don't take your medication every day it can cause the virus to change which will make the medication less effective. Stopping your medication might also cause the amount of virus in your body to rise suddenly. Your doctor might call this a flare.

### What is the cost of treatment?

In Australia, hepatitis B medicine is free, if you have a Medicare card. The only cost you will have to pay is the prescription fee to pick up the medication from the pharmacy. If you don't have a Medicare card talk to your doctor as there may still be options.

### What if I am pregnant and have hepatitis B?

If you are pregnant and have hepatitis B it is really important that your doctor and birthing team

know. Treatment (antiviral therapy) can be given in the last trimester to reduce the amount of virus you have in your blood. Your baby must be given the hepatitis B immunoglobulin injection and the first hepatitis B vaccine within the first 12 hours of birth. If this happens, there is a good chance that your baby will not get hepatitis B. The choice of delivery is up to you as there is no greater risk with either caesarean or vaginal birth.

Mothers with hepatitis B are encouraged to breastfeed.

### What can I do to keep healthy?

The most important thing to do is visit your doctor or liver specialist regularly for checkups (monitoring) which will include blood tests. This will pick up any changes in the virus and your liver function. These changes can lead to serious problems such as cirrhosis or liver cancer if not picked up early.

Other things you can do include the following:

- avoid drinking alcohol, or drink less
- eat a balanced healthy diet
- get regular exercise
- reduce your stress
- try to maintain a healthy body weight
- manage your stress and get support
- rest when you need to.

### Interested in finding out more?

- Talk to your GP
- Contact Hepatitis Queensland on 1800 437 222 or visit [www.hepqld.asn.au](http://www.hepqld.asn.au)