

Hepatitis B – information sheet

Hepatitis B is a viral disease that damages your liver. While children usually develop a mild illness it can be more serious for adults.

A vaccine is available and provided for free to children as part of their routine childhood immunisations. The vaccine is also free for anyone aged under 18 years old, and household or sexual contacts of someone with hepatitis B.



Symptoms – what you can see and feel

Common symptoms of hepatitis B include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Dark coloured urine
- Pale coloured bowel motions
- Generally feeling unwell and tired
- Loss of appetite
- Stomach upsets and pains
- Mild fever
- General aches and pains

Once you are infected with the virus it may be several months before you become unwell. Around 1 in 5 people with hepatitis B do not get any symptoms, however they can still pass it on to others.

If you have symptoms that could be hepatitis B contact your healthcare provider or ring Healthline for free on 0800 611 116. You may need to have a blood test to check if you have the disease.



How it spreads

The disease is spread through coming into contact with the blood, semen or other bodily fluids of someone with hepatitis B. If a person is very infectious it may also be spread through their saliva.

Ways it can be passed on include:

- Unprotected sexual intercourse
- Sharing needles when injecting drugs
- Tattooing, ear-piercing or acupuncture using contaminated instruments
- Childbirth if a mother has the disease
- Coming into contact with the cuts, grazes or sores of someone with the disease

It can also be passed on within households through sharing tooth brushes or razors with an infected person.

Hepatitis B is not spread by holding hands, hugging, kissing on the cheek, sneezing or coughing, food or water, or visiting an infected person.



People at higher risk

People at higher risk of catching hepatitis B include:

- newborn babies to mothers with hepatitis B;
- people who inject drugs into their veins, especially those who use shared needles;
- those who have multiple sexual partners or sex workers;
- those who live in the same house as someone with hepatitis B;
- people who may handle an infected person's blood, for example at work.



Treatment and recovery

Most people with the disease recover within a few months. Their body is able to clear the infection by itself and they do not have any further problems.

Around one in 20 people with hepatitis B are unable to clear the infection. While they may feel well they can continue to infect others and may have long-term liver issues. These people are called 'hepatitis B carriers'. A blood test is the only way to find out whether a person has cleared the infection or has become a carrier.

While children with hepatitis B may only have mild symptoms, they are often more likely to become carriers and develop long term problems.

People with hepatitis B do not need to isolate, but are asked to take precautions to reduce the risk of passing on the disease to others. Their close contacts will need to get tested and vaccinated to protect themselves against hepatitis B.

Protect yourself against hepatitis B

- **The vaccine provides very good protection against hepatitis B.** It is 90% effective in children and 80 – 90% effective in adults.
- **The vaccine is very safe.** The most common side effect is redness and swelling around the injection site. Sometimes people may have a mild fever afterwards.
- **It is free for babies and anyone aged 18 years old or under.** All children born in New Zealand should get immunised as part of their routine vaccinations while growing up.
- **It is also free for household and sexual close contacts of someone with hepatitis B.** Other close contacts are recommended to also get the vaccine if they've not had it before, but there may be a cost to this.
- **The vaccine is recommended for those who work in high risk jobs, such as:**
 - health care workers
 - tattooists and
 - sex workers
- The vaccine will not be free for people in these groups, although it may be funded by your employer.



For more information visit:
www.arphs.nz/hepatitis-b