

Kent County Health Department

Hepatitis B Fact Sheet



What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an illness of the liver. It is caused by the Hepatitis B virus (HBV).

What are the symptoms?

A person infected with hepatitis B may have no symptoms. Others may feel sick for months. Signs of illness include:

- Yellowing of the eyes and skin
- Tiredness
- Fever
- Joint and muscle pain
- Loss of appetite
- Vomiting
- Dark-colored urine

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread by direct contact with infected blood or body fluids. A person is infected when one or more of these fluids enter his body through breaks in the skin.

This can happen by:

- Having oral, anal, or vaginal sex with someone who is infected.
- Sharing needles with someone who is infected, including needles used in injection drug use and tattooing.
- Sharing items like razors and toothbrushes that may carry small amounts of infected blood or saliva.
- Birth: from a mother infected with hepatitis B to her baby.

The virus can be spread before a person knows he is sick and for weeks or months after the illness ends.

Hepatitis B is not spread by casual contact (coughing, sneezing, or hugging) or by contaminated food or water.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms usually start within 60 to 90 days after exposure to the hepatitis B virus. They may start anytime from 45 to 180 days after exposure and could even take up to nine months.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed and treated?

A blood test done by your doctor is needed to diagnose hepatitis B.

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B. Many people fully recover without treatment in a few to several weeks. Their bodies fight off the infection and they become immune to hepatitis B.

Those who do not recover will become chronic carriers of hepatitis B. This means the virus stays in their blood for the rest of their lives. If you become a chronic carrier, you will **always** be able to pass the virus to others. Chronic infection with hepatitis B can lead to serious liver disease such as cirrhosis (scarring) or liver cancer.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis B?

Yes. The vaccine is available to all people. It is especially recommended for:

- People subject to unusual exposure to hepatitis B (lab workers)
- Travelers to countries with high rates of hepatitis B

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- People living in communities with high rates of hepatitis B
- People with existing chronic liver disease
- Sexually active homosexual/bisexual men
- Injecting drug users
- Those living with someone diagnosed with hepatitis B

Vaccination is **required** for babies born to hepatitis B infected mothers.

What are the risk factors for hepatitis B?

Anyone who has not already had hepatitis B or has not received the hepatitis B vaccine can get hepatitis B. Those at greatest risk include:

- People who share needles or syringes with others to inject drugs
- People who have multiple sex partners or a history of a sexually transmitted disease
- Health, dental, and emergency care workers who have contact with blood
- Babies born to mothers with hepatitis B
- Household and sexual contacts of an infected person
- Staff and clients of hemodialysis units and institutions for the developmentally disabled
- Immigrants and adoptees from areas of the world where hepatitis B illness is frequent

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

To prevent hepatitis B:

- Do not share needles or other items (razors, toothbrushes, earrings) which could have small amounts of blood or body fluid on them.
- Avoid oral, anal or vaginal sex with partners who might have hepatitis B and always use a condom for any sexual intercourse.
- Have your baby immunized (given a shot) with the hepatitis B vaccine shortly after birth.
- Get yourself immunized if you or someone you live with is at risk of becoming infected with the hepatitis B virus.
- When handling blood or body fluids, always wear gloves and wash hands often.

Should a person with hepatitis B be excluded from work or school?

People with hepatitis B should not be excluded from work or school. Infected people should be educated on precautions they should take to reduce the likelihood of exposing others to their blood or body fluids.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about hepatitis B or think you may have it, call your health care provider.