

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Information for the Public on Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious disease of the liver and is caused by a virus.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread by having sex or sharing needles with a person who has the virus. It may also be spread within households if razors, toothbrushes, or other items are shared. A baby can get hepatitis B from the mother during birth if the mother is infected.

Approximately 25% of all persons with hepatitis B have no known risk factors for infection.

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

There is a very safe and effective vaccine. It is recommended for all babies, for adolescents who have not already had the vaccine, and for people who are at risk for hepatitis B.

Who is at risk for hepatitis B?

One out of every 20 people will get hepatitis B some time in their life. Your risk is higher if you:

- are born to a mother who has the hepatitis B virus;
- have a job that involves contact with blood;
- live in the same house with someone who has lifelong hepatitis B infection;
- have sex with a person who has hepatitis B;
- have sex with more than one person;
- are a man and have sex with a man;
- shoot drugs;
- have hemophilia;
- are a patient or work in a home for the developmentally disabled; or
- have parents born in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Amazon Basin in South America, the Pacific Islands, or the Middle East.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Some people do not have symptoms. It takes between six weeks and six months to get sick after you contact the virus. If you have symptoms, they might be:

- yellowing of the skin and eyes;
- loss of appetite;
- nausea or vomiting;
- fever;
- stomach pain;
- pain in the joints;
- a very, very, tired feeling; or
- dark urine.

How can I know if I have hepatitis B?

A blood test for HBV can tell if a person has ever been infected.

Do people usually recover from hepatitis B?

Most adults (90%) recover from hepatitis B after several months. They clear the infection from their bodies and become immune. People who are immune will not get hepatitis B again and they cannot pass hepatitis B to others.

Who is a carrier of hepatitis B?

About 10% of adults and most children under the age of five infected with hepatitis B are unable to clear the infection from their bodies. These people no longer have symptoms but still carry the virus in their body and can infect others. About one million people in the U.S. carry hepatitis B.

Is there any treatment for hepatitis B?

Some people who are carriers have benefited from treatment with interferon. Talk to your doctor about this.

If I am pregnant, should I worry about hepatitis B?

Pregnant women who are infected with hepatitis B can spread the disease to their babies. Many of these babies will develop lifelong hepatitis B infection if they don't get medicine and vaccine shortly after birth.

If infected, what should I do to protect others?

- Do not share a toothbrush, razor, or other items that could come in contact with blood.
- Cover open sores or other breaks in your skin.
- Do not donate blood, plasma, body organs, or sperm.
- Follow the "safer sex" practices by having only one sex partner and using latex condoms correctly every time you have sex.
- Your sex partner should get hepatitis B vaccine.
- If you are a carrier of hepatitis B, all the people who live with you should get the vaccine.
- If you are injecting drugs, do not share needles. Seek treatment for drug use. Do not share needles, syringes, cookers, cottons, water, or rinse cups.