

New York State Department of Health

Hepatitis B (serum hepatitis)

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). The virus can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure and death.

Who gets hepatitis B?

One out of 20 people in the United States will get infected with HBV some time during their lives. Anyone can get hepatitis B, but you are at greater risk if you:

- have sex with someone infected with HBV
- have multiple sex partners
- are a man and have sex with men
- have ever been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease
- are an injection drug user
- live in the same house with someone who has lifelong (chronic) HBV infection
- are a health care or public safety worker who has contact with human blood
- are an infant born to an HBV-infected mother
- are a hemodialysis patient
- are an infant/child or immigrant from areas with high rates of infection

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis B virus can be found in the blood and, to a lesser extent, saliva, semen and other body fluids of an infected person. It is spread by direct contact with infected body fluids; usually by needle stick injury or sexual contact. Hepatitis B virus is not spread by casual contact.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

The symptoms of hepatitis B include fatigue, poor appetite, stomach pain, fever, nausea, vomiting and occasionally joint pain, hives or rash. Urine may become darker in color, and then jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. Adults are more likely than children to develop symptoms; however, up to 50 percent of adults who have acute infection do not have any symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear six weeks to six months after exposure, but usually within four months.

For how long is a person able to spread the virus?

The virus can be found in blood and other body fluids several weeks before symptoms appear and generally persists for several months afterward. Approximately 10 percent of infected adults may become long-term (chronic) carriers of the virus. Infants infected at birth have a 90 percent chance of becoming chronically infected.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person that is acutely infected once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed. Interferon is the most effective treatment for chronic HBV infection and is successful in 25 to 50 percent of cases. Chronic carriers of HBV should avoid drinking alcohol or taking medications which are harmful to the liver, as these actions can make the liver disease worse.

What precautions should hepatitis B carriers take?

Chronic hepatitis B carriers should follow standard hygienic practices to ensure that close contacts are not directly contaminated by his or her blood or other body fluids. Carriers must not share razors, toothbrushes or any other object that may become contaminated with blood. In addition, susceptible household members, particularly sexual partners, should be immunized with hepatitis B vaccine. It is important for carriers to inform their dentist and health care providers.

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

A safe and effective vaccine to prevent hepatitis B is available. The hepatitis B vaccine is recommended for people in high-risk settings who have not already been infected and for infants who are born to infected mothers. It is recommended that all children and adolescents be vaccinated against hepatitis B along with their routine childhood immunizations beginning at birth. A special hepatitis B immune globulin is also available for people who are exposed to the virus. In the event of exposure to hepatitis B, consult a doctor or the local health department.

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