

Hepatitis B

What is Hepatitis B?

The term "hepatitis" is used to describe a common form of liver injury. Hepatitis simply means "inflammation of the liver". There are many causes of hepatitis; examples include alcohol, certain drugs, poisonous mushrooms, and viruses

What do I need to do?

- ◆ Do not share toothbrushes, razors, hair brushes
- ◆ Avoid alcohol, herbs and panadol (paracetamol) in doses over 2gm a day
- ◆ Cover all cuts or sores, wash your hands after touching your blood or body fluids
- ◆ Do not donate blood, plasma, body organs, tissue, or sperm.
- ◆ Carefully dispose of menstrual pads and tampons
- ◆ Do not share syringes and needles

Hepatitis B is not spread by casual contact such as holding hands, kissing on the cheek, eating food prepared by a carrier, sneezing or coughing.

Can I Give the Disease to Others?

Hepatitis B can be transmitted through infected blood, instruments, needles, bodily fluids and sexual contact. Condoms are recommended during sex with a new partner but are not required if your long-term partner has been vaccinated. The risk of transmitting hepatitis B during pregnancy may depend upon the level of virus in your blood stream. In general, the risk is about 5% (about 1 in 20) but is increased in people who are also infected with HIV.

Immunisation with the vaccine is recommended for family and household contacts of individuals with Hep B.

What is the Natural History of Hepatitis B?

In 5% of adults (1 in 20) the virus makes itself at home in the liver, where it continues to make copies of itself for many years. People who continue to harbour the virus are referred to as "carriers" while liver damage associated with longstanding infection is referred to as "chronic hepatitis" there is 95% chance that Hep B virus will clear itself from your body within 6 months of acquiring it if acquired over 2 years of age. However, there is a 95% chance of becoming a chronic carrier is acquired as a young child.

In general, chronic hepatitis B appears to be a slowly progressive disease that may gradually advance over 10-40 years.

- ◆ Some patients develop **NO significant liver disease** or fibrosis (scarring)
- ◆ Most patients develop **mild to moderate liver disease** variable fibrosis (scarring) over 10 - 20years
- ◆ 20% of patients develop **severe liver disease with cirrhosis** (scarring) in 5 years
- ◆ 20% of patients with **cirrhosis** develop **liver cancer or liver failure** in 5 years

A liver biopsy is typically done prior to treatment to determine the severity of liver damage and provide confirmation of the underlying disease. This involves obtaining a tiny sample of the liver tissue and looking at it under a microscope.

Is There a Treatment for Chronic Hepatitis B?

Treatment options currently include **Lamivudine** tablets or **Interferon** injections.

Lamivudine has no side effects and is very effective in switching off viral replication in over 99% of patients. Approximately 20% of patients per annum are able to clear the virus. However 20% relapse after treatment has ceased.

Interferon therapy may cause side effects such as "flu-like" symptoms, depression, headache, and decreased appetite. In addition, interferon may depress the immune system, increasing the risk of serious infections. Frequent blood tests are needed to monitor white blood cells, platelets and liver enzymes.

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