

# Hepatitis B



Hepatitis B is a contagious liver disease. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV) that attacks the liver. HBsAg (Hepatitis B surface antigen) is a blood test to discover whether or not you have been infected with the hepatitis B virus. A positive test result means that you are infected. This can be an “acute” or a “chronic” infection. It is called an “acute infection” when a person is first infected with the hepatitis B virus. A person may not have any symptoms or could become seriously ill. Fortunately, most healthy adults who are infected with the hepatitis B virus will recover and develop protective antibodies. If you recover from an acute infection and clear the virus (which usually happens within six months) you will be “immune” to any future hepatitis B infection and you can no longer pass the virus to others. While most adults will recover from an acute infection, most infants and young children who are infected with hepatitis B will not get rid of the virus and develop a “chronic infection”. You have a “chronic infection” when the virus remains in the blood for more than six months. Even if you have a chronic infection, there is a chance that you are cured naturally, but it is also possible that the Hepatitis B virus stays in your body for the rest of your life. A Hepatitis B carrier may not have symptoms, but as many as one in four people with chronic Hepatitis B develop serious health problems, such as liver inflammation (hepatitis), liver damage (cirrhosis), and liver cancer. If you had a positive HBsAg test, you need further tests to establish whether you have an “acute” or a “chronic” infection. It is also important to know that as long as you test positive for HBsAg, you can spread the virus to other people. It is therefore important to know how the virus is transmitted and how you can protect your family, your unborn child and others from being infected with HBV. You can read about this and other valuable information in this handout.

## ***1. Signs and Symptoms of Hepatitis B***

Hepatitis B is called a “silent infection” because most people have few or even no symptoms. Symptoms that may occur are:

- Jaundice (yellowing of your skin and the whites of your eyes).
- Dark urine.
- Light-colored feces.
- Fever.
- Muscle or joint pains.
- Loss of appetite.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Abdominal pain.
- Weakness and fatigue.

If you have serious symptoms like severe nausea and vomiting, jaundice, and/or a bloated or swollen stomach you need to see your family doctor immediately.



## ***2. Transmission of Hepatitis B***

Hepatitis B is infectious, but it is not spread by general contact such as hand shaking, talking, hugging, sharing dishes, cooking or eating utensils, or drinking glasses. Hepatitis B can spread when blood, semen, or other bodily fluids from an infected person enter the body of an uninfected person.

Ways in which Hepatitis B is spread :

- Sexual contact with an infected person.
- Needle-sharing with an infected person: For example unsterilized needles used for acupuncture, tattoo, piercing, and injection of illegal drugs.
- Sharing of toothbrushes and razors that haven't been sterilized.
- Mother-to-child transmission: An infected mother can pass the Hepatitis B virus to her baby during childbirth.

## ***3. If you tested positive for HbsAg, follow the advice below:***

- Make sure that you get further testing to make an accurate diagnosis.
- Protect your health:
  - Don't smoke, drink or use illegal drugs.
  - Have a healthy diet and get plenty of exercise
  - If you have a chronic infection, it is important that – even when you feel well - you see your doctor regularly (at least yearly). This allows your doctor to monitor the state of the infection and decide if you need and when you need to start using drugs that attack the virus.
- Protect your family members:
  - Get the baby's father and everyone who lives in your house tested for Hepatitis B by doing a HBsAg test. If they are not infected, they should be vaccinated for hepatitis B to protect them from getting the infection. The Hepatitis B vaccine is typically given as three or four injections over six months (at 0, 1 and 6 months). At the end of the series of injections, a blood test will be done to establish if your body had the right response to the vaccinations to protect against Hepatitis B.
  - If your spouse is not vaccinated against Hepatitis B, avoid sexual contact or use a condom. Your partner should understand, however, that condoms may not be completely protective.
- Do not share personal items with other people, such as toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or any needles for acupuncture, tattoo, or piercing.
- Cover cuts and sores to avoid exposing other people to things that can have your blood on them.
- Do not prechew food before you feed it to your baby.
- Do not use illegal drugs or share syringes.
- If you're pregnant it is important to protect your unborn baby from being infected. Follow the advice below.



#### ***4. Preventing mother-to-child transmission***

All pregnant women are tested for Hepatitis B. If you are pregnant and tested positive for HbsAg, then there is a high risk of transmitting the virus to your unborn child. A baby's immune system is still immature. If a baby is infected with the virus, there is a 90% chance that he or she develops a lifelong, chronic infection. As many as one in four people with chronic Hepatitis B develop serious health problems, such as liver inflammation (hepatitis), liver damage (cirrhosis), and liver cancer. The good news is that there are ways to reduce the risk of passing the infection to your baby.

- **Have your baby at the hospital.** It is best to deliver your baby in the hospital, so that he or she can get the necessary shots after the birth.
- **Hepatitis B hyper immune globulin (HBIG) given within 12-24 hours after birth.** HBIG is a medicine that gives your baby a “boost” or extra help to fight the virus. The HBIG shot is only given to babies of mothers who have Hepatitis B and should be given within 12-24 hours after the baby is born. In up to 95% of the cases this injection protects the baby against the virus. This protection lasts only a couple of weeks. It is therefore important that the baby also gets vaccinated against Hepatitis B.
- **Hepatitis B vaccine.** Your baby will get vaccinated by receiving three shots: at birth, at one month and at six months. All these shots are necessary to help keep your baby from getting Hepatitis. After your baby has had all the Hepatitis B shots, your doctor will test your baby's blood. The blood test shows if your baby is protected and does not have Hepatitis B.

#### ***5. Can I breastfeed my baby if I have Hepatitis B?***

Yes, you can breastfeed your baby if he or she received both HBIG within 12-24 hours after birth as well as the vaccinations as described above. In a group of 369 babies born to women with chronic hepatitis, all of the breastfed infants tested negative, but nine formula-fed babies tested positive for HBV after the initial vaccination series. Lack of breastfeeding places the baby of a mother infected with hepatitis B at greater risk of contracting the disease. So, make sure your baby gets the necessary shots and breastfeed your baby!

For more information visit the following website:

<http://www.hepb.org/hepb/index.htm>

Please be aware that the information provided is intended solely for general educational and informational purposes only. It is neither intended nor implied to be a substitute for professional medical advice. Always seek the advice of your physician for any questions you may have regarding your medical condition. Never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have received in this program.

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