

Hepatitis B

Fact Sheet

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is caused by the Hepatitis B virus, which is spread between people by contact with body fluids. It is a serious disease that causes your liver to become inflamed. Most people recover completely. Some people have long-lasting effects, which can lead to liver disease (including cirrhosis), liver cancer and death. People who are infected with Hepatitis B when they are children are more likely to have serious liver disease later in life.

After an acute infection with the Hepatitis B virus, some people become chronically infected. People with chronic hepatitis can transmit the disease, including mother to child.

Hepatitis A, B and C are all different diseases, so they have different symptoms and different treatments. The Hepatitis B vaccine does not protect you from Hepatitis A or Hepatitis C.

How did I acquire Hepatitis B?

The Hepatitis B virus is spread when infected body fluids (blood, semen, saliva, or vaginal fluid) come in contact with the blood stream of another person. This can occur:

- From mother to child around the time of birth
- Via unprotected vaginal, oral, or anal sex
- When the skin is pierced with contaminated equipment, including:
 - Shared drug injecting equipment (needles, syringes and other equipment for injecting drugs and drug solutions)
 - Needlestick injuries
 - Unsafe injections, tattoos, body piercing, acupuncture and other procedures that involve unsterile body cutting or piercing
- By sharing personal items that may have blood on them such as toothbrushes, razors, sex toys
- When blood from an infected person makes direct contact with an open wound of another person

Hepatitis B is NOT transmitted by casual contact such as hugging, or holding hands, kissing on the cheek, coughing, or sneezing, sharing food, sharing eating utensils, or eating food prepared by someone with Hepatitis B.

Who is at risk from Hepatitis B infections?

Any person who is unvaccinated or non-immune to Hepatitis B and comes into contact with infected body fluids is at a higher risk of developing a Hepatitis B infection. The highest risk groups for **becoming infected with the Hepatitis B virus** include:

- People who use injectable drugs
- People who have sex without a condom, especially men who have sex with men
- Household contacts of people infected with Hepatitis B
- People in custodial settings
- People who work in high-risk occupational settings such as healthcare, correctional facilities, laboratories, mortuaries, ambulance, or police services

The highest risk groups of having **chronic Hepatitis B** include:

- People born in a country/region where Hepatitis B is common such as China, Southeast, Central and South Asia, Pacific Islands, countries in Africa, Central and Eastern Europe. Most people with chronic Hepatitis B from these countries were infected at birth
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (particularly those born before the introduction of universal infant Hepatitis B vaccination in May 2000)
- People whose mother had chronic Hepatitis B and who were born prior to the universal infant Hepatitis B vaccination
- People living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or Hepatitis C virus

Can Hepatitis B be prevented?

The best protection from Hepatitis B is vaccination. The Hepatitis B vaccination is available from general practitioners and Aboriginal

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Community Controlled Health Services, also at sexual health clinics and at some other services for people at highest risk of infection. In Australia, the Hepatitis B vaccination is part of the infant immunisation program.

Other ways to prevent Hepatitis B infection include:

- Using condoms during sex
- Covering any open wounds or cuts with a waterproof dressing
- Not sharing personal items like toothbrushes and razors
- Only going to piercing and tattoo studios that are registered and use proper sterilisation techniques
- Using gloves when helping with first aid

How will my care change whilst in hospital?

- Regular and thorough hand hygiene is one of the most successful ways to prevent the spread of **ALL** infections.
- The hospital staff will wear protective apparel such as gloves and an apron or gown when they anticipate contact with blood and/or bodily fluids

Good Hand Hygiene Practices

Hand Hygiene is the most effective way to prevent **ALL** infections, including the flu and the common cold. Encourage your family and friends to learn and maintain good hand hygiene practices every day.

Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the Infection Prevention and Control team.

Alternative - Alcohol based hand rub/gel

During your stay in hospital, you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based hand rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled/dirty. There is

a variety of brands on the market and available for purchase at most pharmacies. You may choose to use this type of product at home.

Can I still have visitors?

Yes – you can still have visitors. **Casual contact such as hugging and kissing is OK.** If a friend or relative has had recent surgery, have an illness, or has a compromised immune system they may wish to contact the Infection Prevention and Control team or speak with their GP for further advice. We ask that you also encourage your visitors to perform hand hygiene before and after they enter your room. They can use either soap and water at the wall sink in the ward, or the alcohol-based hand rub provided outside your room.

What happens when I get home?

- It is important that anyone assisting you with close personal care wears gloves if they are going to be in contact with any wounds, blood, urine, or faeces. They must wash their hands well, after removing their gloves and disposing of the gloves immediately in the rubbish bin.
- If you have Hepatitis B it is important to tell people who may have been exposed, so that they can get tested and vaccinated. Your doctor or sexual health clinic can help you identify people who may be at risk and help contact them. If you wish, your doctor can make the contact for you, while also keeping your identity confidential.

What is the public health response?

Doctors, hospitals, and laboratories must notify new cases of viral Hepatitis to the local Public Health Unit. This information is kept confidential and is used to control further spread and better understand who is at risk of the disease.

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Where can I get further information?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Prevention and Control team, ask your nurse to contact the Infection Prevention and Control Office. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Our contact numbers are (02) 9480 9433 or (02) 9480 9732.

Alternatively,

- **Contact the Local Public Health Unit 1300 066 055**
- **Contact the Hepatitis Infoline (02) 9332 1599 or 1800 803 990 (outside Sydney)**
- **NSW Sexual Health Infoline 1800 451 624**

References

NSW Dept of Health; Communicable Diseases Factsheets – Hepatitis B (5 July 2019)

Australian Government Department of Health, Canberra; Health Topics - Hepatitis B Information (27 May 2020)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); General Factsheet – Hepatitis B (12 October 2021)

National Health and Medical Research Council; Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare (2019)

NSW Dept of Health; Infection Prevention and Control Policy PD2017_013

Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI). Australian Immunisation Handbook, Australian Government Department of Health, Canberra, 2018, www.immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au