



## **PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET**

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# **Hepatitis B**

### **What is hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B is a type of virus that attacks the liver. The hepatitis B virus is found in the blood and body fluids of infected persons. Many people who have hepatitis B recover completely; however, some can develop lifelong infection. Cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer or liver failure are all serious problems that can occur after lifelong infection with this virus but may take up to 20 years to develop.

### **How is hepatitis B spread?**

The hepatitis B virus can spread whenever blood or fluids containing blood (such as semen, vaginal fluids, or other body fluids) from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. This could occur when infected blood enters through a break in the skin or by sharing needles or “works” when “shooting” drugs. The hepatitis B virus can also spread from an infected mother to her baby during birth or by sharing items such as toothbrushes, razors or anything else with blood on it from a person who has hepatitis B virus. The hepatitis B virus is not spread by hugging, sneezing, coughing, breast feeding or sharing eating utensils.

### **What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?**

Many people have mild symptoms or no symptoms but can still pass the virus on to others. Common symptoms of hepatitis B infection include fever, lack of energy, nausea, vomiting, stomach pain and jaundice (yellow color in the white part of the eyes and dark urine). Symptoms can begin as soon as six weeks or as long as 6 months after exposure to the virus.

### **Can it be treated?**

Many people with hepatitis B get better without treatment. There is no treatment to prevent acute hepatitis B from becoming a lifelong infection. Some who have lifelong infection with hepatitis B may be treated with medication, although, not everyone will need medication.

### **How can a person with hepatitis B take care of themselves?**

- See your healthcare provider regularly.
- Do not drink alcohol.
- Check with your healthcare provider before taking any new medicines, including over the counter and herbal medicines.
- Get a vaccine to protect against hepatitis A and get tested for hepatitis C.

### **What steps should pregnant women with hepatitis B take?**

If you are pregnant, your baby can get infected with hepatitis B during birth. Be sure to talk with your healthcare provider about steps you can take now to prevent this. Make sure your baby gets a shot called hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) and the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine within 12 hours of birth. Ask your healthcare provider when your baby should get the next dose of hepatitis B vaccine. Once all vaccines have been given, your baby should get a blood test to be sure he or she is protected against hepatitis B. If you have hepatitis B it is safe to breastfeed your baby.

**Over**

## **How can you prevent hepatitis B?**

The best way to prevent hepatitis B is to get a vaccine against hepatitis B. Other ways to reduce the risk of getting hepatitis B virus is to avoid contact with blood or body fluids by:

- Use barrier protection such as a condom when having sex.
- Avoid contact with blood and other body fluids. Wear protective gloves when it is likely you will come in contact with blood or body fluids.
- Do not share items such as a toothbrush, razor or anything else that could have blood on it.
- If you are pregnant, get a blood test for hepatitis B. If you have hepatitis B virus your baby can be given a vaccine and HBIG (hepatitis B immune globulin) within 12 hours to reduce their risk of getting hepatitis B.
- Do not shoot drugs. If you do, seek treatment to try and stop; if you can't, reduce your risk by not sharing needles or equipment (including cotton, filters, caps, spoons, cookers and alcohol swabs) every time you inject.

People who may have been exposed to the blood or body fluids of an infected person should see a health care provider right away.

### **Who should get the hepatitis B vaccine?**

All newborns and children through the age of 18 and adults over 18 who are at risk should receive the hepatitis vaccine. Adults at risk include:

- People who have had sex with someone infected with hepatitis B virus
- People who shoot drugs
- People who have sex with more than one partner
- Men who have sex with men
- People who live in the same house with someone who has long-term hepatitis B infection
- People who have a job that involves contact with human blood
- Hemodialysis patients
- People who travel to areas where hepatitis B is common

If you are uncertain if you are at risk, ask your healthcare provider.

### **Who should not get the hepatitis B vaccine?**

People who have had a serious reaction to baker's yeast (the kind used for making bread), other vaccine components, or a previous dose of the vaccine should not get hepatitis B vaccine. Those who are ill with a fever should talk with their healthcare provider before getting the vaccine.

**For more information, please contact  
Boston Public Health Commission  
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(617) 534-5611 or [www.bphc.org](http://www.bphc.org)**