



Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is caused by a virus that infects the liver. It's easy to pass on during sex or by sharing injecting equipment. Most people who get it make a full recovery, but for a minority it can be more serious.

Hepatitis B

Symptoms of hepatitis B:

Many people who get hepatitis B notice no symptoms or they are so mild that they may not realise they have it. But weeks or months after infection it can cause:

- mild flu-like symptoms
- diarrhoea
- nausea
- extreme tiredness
- itchy skin
- stomach pain
- jaundice (where your skin and the whites of your eyes turn yellow, your urine turns dark and your faeces (poo) turn pale).

Symptoms can last several weeks, taking months to get back to normal.

Most people make a full recovery but up to one in 20 become 'carriers' with chronic (long-term) infection. They usually feel fine but stay infectious to others, with a small risk of going on to develop liver disease.

Around one in 100 people gets a more serious illness which can be fatal if not treated immediately.

Transmission

The virus can be passed on in these body fluids:

- blood
- semen
- pre-cum
- vaginal secretions.

It's passed on through:

- oral, vaginal or anal sex without a condom
- rimming
- sharing sex toys
- sharing injecting drug equipment such as needles and syringes which can carry infected blood
- a pregnant woman with the virus can give it to her baby during childbirth.

It can be found in saliva but there are no proven cases of it being passed on through kissing. Infections from bites are rare. You can pass on hepatitis B from two weeks before developing jaundice.

Avoid sharing razors, toothbrushes, nail scissors, hair clippers and tweezers because traces of blood on them can pass on hepatitis B. This includes dried blood as the virus can survive for at least a week outside of the body.

How can I protect myself and others?

You can protect yourself by getting a vaccination. This is especially important if you belong to one of the high-risk

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Last review date 11.09.15

Next review date 11.09.18

Date printed 19.10.17

Page 1 of 2

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groups, i.e. you:

- have close contact with someone with the infection
- are a gay man
- inject drugs
- travel to parts of the world where the infection is common.

There is a vaccine which can protect you against both hepatitis A and B.

If you're in a high-risk group for hepatitis B you can usually get vaccinated for free by your GP or at your sexual health clinic.

You may need a booster injection of the vaccination after five years.

If you have hepatitis B tell people you live with or recently had sex with to urgently ask their doctor about vaccination. Avoid sex until told you are no longer infectious.

Although not as effective as being vaccinated, the following can also cut the risk:

- condoms for penetrative sex
- a latex barrier (eg, a condom cut into a square) for rimming.

If you're a carrier you may want to tell a partner and explain that you're infectious. They can then decide if they want to take precautions (eg, get vaccinated) or are happy to take any risk.

That way they cannot accuse you of infecting them without them knowing the risk was there.

If you're not vaccinated against hepatitis B and are exposed to the virus, there is a treatment which may stop you being infected. Hepatitis B immunoglobulin (HBIG) is an injection of antibodies. It's best to take it within 48 hours of exposure - you'll be vaccinated at the same time.

What can I do if I think I have hepatitis B?

Most cases are diagnosed by GPs (family doctors), not sexual health clinics, and treatment isn't needed for most people. If you had sex with someone recently or you share your house with others, they can be vaccinated to stop them getting the infection - they should see a doctor straight away.

Avoid sex until you're told are no longer infectious or until your partners have been vaccinated.

A blood test will confirm whether you have the virus.

Is there any treatment for hepatitis B?

In most cases no treatment is needed for acute hepatitis B. It may take a while to recover and you may want to take some time off work.

If you have chronic hepatitis B you may need treatment at some point to try to slow down the replication of the virus. However, treatment cannot usually cure chronic hepatitis B. A small number of carriers go on to get liver disease (and a small number of those get liver cancer), and may need a liver transplant.

If your body clears hepatitis B, you're immune and cannot get it again - but you can get other types of hepatitis.

What else can I do to stay healthy?

- avoid alcohol until your liver recovers
- hepatitis B can make you more vulnerable to infection, so smoking is best avoided due to the health problems it causes
- recreational drugs should be avoided to allow your liver to get better
- eat a healthy balanced diet.

HIV and hepatitis B

If you're living with HIV and are co-infected with hepatitis B, please see our co-infection page for more information.

Next: Hepatitis C »

« Back to: Hepatitis A

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Page 2 of 2

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