



Hepatitis B

Factsheet for patients

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. There are several different viruses which cause hepatitis, and hepatitis B is one of these.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Many people never have any symptoms of acute hepatitis B, but if there are any, symptoms will appear between six weeks and six months after being infected. Some adults notice a short flu-like illness which may not be diagnosed as hepatitis B. More serious symptoms such as vomiting, tummy pain and yellow jaundice may occur, and will need treatment from a doctor. Rarely, acute infection causes a very severe illness which can lead to death.

Acute and chronic hepatitis B

Hepatitis B can cause an acute or a chronic illness.

An acute illness is one that gets better quite quickly, usually within weeks or at most a few months.

Most adults recover fully from acute hepatitis B, normally within six months.

Chronic hepatitis B is hepatitis B which lasts longer than six months. Some people with chronic hepatitis B remain healthy but about a quarter will develop long-term liver disease. Most are infectious and must take precautions to avoid passing on the virus (see below).

How do you get hepatitis B?

In this country, in Europe and in North America, hepatitis B is mainly passed from person to person through unprotected sex. Worldwide, most people get hepatitis B by contact with infected blood, especially when babies are born to infected mothers and are not vaccinated immediately after birth.

Sex

Hepatitis B can be passed on during unprotected sex with an infected person. If you are concerned about sexually-transmitted disease, you can get confidential advice from the Sexual health/Genitourinary Medicine (GUM) clinics listed at the end of this leaflet.

Blood

A tiny amount of blood from someone who has the virus can pass the infection on if it gets into someone else's bloodstream. This can happen through:

- Contact with an open wound, cut or scratch.
- A contaminated needle or other sharp instrument. People who inject drugs and share injecting equipment are at high risk. Tattooing, piercing and acupuncture can be a risk if sterile equipment is not used.
- Medical and dental treatment in countries where equipment is not properly sterilised.
- All blood donated in the UK is now screened for hepatitis B, but before screening it was possible to become infected by receiving blood or blood products from an infected person. In countries where blood is not screened, blood transfusions may still be a cause of infection.

Mother to baby

Infected mothers can pass on the virus to their babies around the time of birth, but vaccination of these babies at birth prevents most infections.

How can I protect others if I have hepatitis B?

- Do not use anyone else's toothbrush, razor, scissors or other personal items or let them use yours.
- If having sex, tell your partner(s) to make sure he/she is vaccinated and practise safer sex by using a condom.
- Carefully clean and cover cuts, scratches and open wounds with a waterproof plaster.
- Clean up blood from floors and work surfaces with undiluted household bleach.
- Do not donate blood or semen or register as an organ donor.

Treatment

Many people with acute hepatitis B do not need treatment as they do not develop long-term liver damage. They may feel more tired than usual and need rest. A blood test should be done six months after diagnosis to check if the virus is cleared. Until this check you should follow the advice about protecting others from infection.

People with chronic hepatitis B should be checked regularly by a specialist in liver diseases to check

whether liver damage is occurring. This may involve a test called a fibroscan. Some people with chronic hepatitis B may also benefit from treatment with antiviral drugs.

Vaccination against hepatitis A, the annual flu, and pneumococcal infections are recommended.

Family and friends

Sexual partners, children and other household members of a person with acute or chronic hepatitis B should be vaccinated. Anyone who has shared needles should also be vaccinated. They also need to be tested to check if they have hepatitis B already. Advice on protection of these close contacts can be obtained from your GP.

There is no risk of infection from normal social contact so visitors, friends and work colleagues do not need vaccination. For example, you cannot catch hepatitis B from shaking hands or hugging an infected person, or from a toilet seat. Crockery and cutlery used by someone with hepatitis B can be washed in hot soapy water or a dishwasher in the normal way. Any blood should be cleaned up immediately as described above.

Hepatitis B vaccine

The vaccine is given by injection as three separate doses. Sometimes extra boosters are needed. It is important to finish the course. A blood test may be taken at the same time.

Information and support

If you have any questions, you can talk to your GP or nurse.

Sexual health/Genitourinary Medicine (GUM) clinics provide confidential advice. Please visit www.sexualhealthni.info/home for the times and contact details of your local sexual health/GUM clinic.

Northern Ireland Hepatitis B and C Managed Clinical Network provides information on hepatitis B and C. www.hepbandcni.net

RVH Liver Support Group offers support to those in Northern Ireland living with liver disease and is an independent group affiliated to the British Liver Trust. www.rvhliversupportgroup.org

British Liver Trust provides information on all forms of liver disease. Helpline: 0800 652 7330 (10.00am-3.00pm, Mon-Fri) www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

Clinical nurse specialists (hepatology)
Tel: 07788 883457/07712 506350

This factsheet is also available as a PDF in other languages from:
www.publichealth.hscni.net

