



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
FAQ125
WOMEN'S HEALTH

Protecting Yourself Against Hepatitis B

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What is hepatitis B virus?

Hepatitis B is a type of hepatitis virus that attacks and damages the liver—an organ located at the upper-right side of the abdomen. The liver cleanses the body of waste. It breaks down and filters out any harmful substances that you consume. The liver also makes bile, which helps you to digest food.

How does hepatitis B virus infection damage the liver?

Infection with hepatitis B can damage the liver over time and lead to cirrhosis of the liver. In this condition, cells of the liver die and are replaced by scar tissue. Over time, the liver stops working. Hepatitis B also is the most common cause of liver cancer.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B virus infection?

A person may be infected with the hepatitis B virus and not know it—sometimes the virus does not cause any symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they may include the following:

- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Extreme fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Headache
- Stomachache
- Muscle aches

Is infection with hepatitis B virus permanent?

In most adults, the infection clears up completely in a few weeks. Most adults then become immune to the virus—that is, they will not get it again. They can no longer pass the virus to others.

However, in about 5–10% of infected adults (and in many children younger than 5 years), the infection never clears up completely. This is known as chronic infection. These people keep the virus for the rest of their lives and are known as

carriers. They may not always have symptoms. About 1 million people in the United States are carriers of the hepatitis B virus. All carriers can pass the virus to others.

How is hepatitis B virus spread?

Hepatitis B virus is spread by direct contact with body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluids) of an infected person. This can happen during sexual intercourse, while sharing needles used to inject (“shoot”) drugs, and during delivery of a baby. Hepatitis B virus also can be spread if you live with an infected person and share household items that may transmit body fluids, like toothbrushes or razors.

Hepatitis B virus cannot be spread by casual contact with people and objects. Casual contact includes shaking hands, sharing food or drink, or coughing and sneezing.

Who is at risk of hepatitis B virus infection?

Anyone can get hepatitis B virus. Your risk is higher if you

- were born to a mother infected with hepatitis B virus
- live with or have sex with an infected person
- have sex with more than one partner
- inject drugs
- work in a job that involves contact with human blood
- receive blood products

Is a test available to see if I am infected with hepatitis B virus?

A simple blood test can show whether you are infected with the hepatitis B virus and can pass it to others. If your test result is positive, meaning that you are infected with the virus, it is important for you to take certain steps to avoid passing the infection to others:

- Do not donate blood or plasma or arrange to be an organ donor.
- Do not share toothbrushes or razors or other objects that could come in contact with blood.
- Tell sex partners—past and present—and the people you live with.

How can hepatitis B virus infection be prevented?

The best protection against hepatitis B virus is a vaccine. The vaccine triggers your body’s immune system to fight off the virus when you are exposed to it. It is usually given in three doses. The vaccine is recommended for the following people:

- All babies, children, and adolescents aged 18 years and younger
- Anyone at high risk

People who have been recently exposed to the virus and are not vaccinated are usually given the vaccine along with a shot of **hepatitis B immune globulin**. Hepatitis B immune globulin contains antibodies to the virus. It gives temporary protection (about 3–6 months) against hepatitis B.

What lifestyle changes can decrease the risk of hepatitis B virus infection?

The following lifestyle changes can decrease your risk of getting the virus:

- Use a latex condom during sex.
- Practice “safe” sex (know your partner’s sexual history and have only one sexual partner).
- If you are injecting drugs, get help and try to stop. If you cannot stop, do not share needles.

What should pregnant women know about hepatitis B virus?

If you are pregnant, you should be tested for hepatitis B virus (see the FAQ [Hepatitis B Virus in Pregnancy](#)). Pregnant women who are infected with hepatitis B virus can pass the infection to their babies. The babies can get sick or be carriers.

Today, all newborn babies in the United States should be given the hepatitis B vaccine. Babies who are vaccinated against hepatitis B virus are protected against becoming infected.

Glossary

Carriers: Persons who have a disease without showing symptoms and who can transmit the disease to another person.

Hepatitis B Immune Globulin: A substance given to provide temporary protection against infection with hepatitis B virus.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ125: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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