



Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus which infects the liver. It is present in both the blood and body fluids of infected people.

Adults who are infected may have no symptoms or they may become ill. Symptoms may include fever, abdominal pain, dark urine, nausea and jaundice (yellow skin and eyes). After infection, most adults recover and become immune to the virus. A few people do not clear the virus. They become carriers and may infect other people.

Hepatitis B carriers

Carriers of hepatitis B have been infected and their immune system has not been able to clear the virus from the body.

Hepatitis B carriers may experience no health problems or over a period of years may develop liver disease such as cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver or liver cancer.

If you are a carrier of hepatitis B:

have regular blood tests to check your liver

drink as little alcohol as possible

use condoms for sex unless you are sure your partners have been vaccinated against hepatitis B

- steady sex partners and people living in your household should be vaccinated against hepatitis B
- you should be tested for hepatitis A and vaccinated against it if the test shows that you are not already immune
- advise health care workers, including your dentist, that you are a carrier of hepatitis B
- do not donate blood, semen or other body organs or tissues.

How is hepatitis B transmitted?

Hepatitis B is spread by blood-to-blood contact or by having sex with an infected person. Oral sex may transmit hepatitis B, especially swallowing semen from an infected man.

A high risk for blood contact is the sharing of needles or equipment with injecting drug users, who may not know they are infectious.

Sharing razors or toothbrushes with an infectious person may spread the disease.

Health workers may be at risk by accidental needlestick injuries.

Women who are hepatitis B carriers may infect their babies around the time of birth. Since 2000, all babies are vaccinated soon after birth, reducing the risk of becoming carriers or contracting the infection later in life.

To prevent spreading or contracting the infection:

- do not share injecting drug equipment
- use condoms with sex partners
- do not share razors or toothbrushes
- do not allow your blood or body fluids to come into contact with others.

Are you at risk?

Most Australians are at low risk of contracting hepatitis B infection. However, some groups have a higher risk of infection.

These include:

- injecting drug users
- men who have sex with men
- sex partners of hepatitis B carriers
- sex workers
- Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders
- People of Asian racial background

Testing for hepatitis B

Hepatitis B infection can be diagnosed from a blood test. Different tests are available; you should discuss the results carefully with your doctor to make sure you understand what they mean.

Hepatitis B surface antigen is present in the blood of people who are infected with hepatitis B virus. Most adults will clear the virus from the body usually after several months to a year. If the hepatitis B virus is not cleared from the body (i.e. in carriers), the surface antigen remains positive for life.

Hepatitis B core antibody is present in the blood of people who have been infected with hepatitis B in the past. It is present in carriers of hepatitis B, but also in people who have cleared the virus from their body. If the surface antibody is negative, people with positive core antibody are immune to hepatitis B. They are not carriers and there is no risk of transmitting the virus to others or developing hepatitis B-related liver complications later.

Hepatitis B surface antibody is positive in people who have been exposed to hepatitis B previously but have cleared the virus from their body. It is also usually positive in people who have been vaccinated against hepatitis B. People who test positive for surface antibody are immune to hepatitis B or are vaccinated; they are not carriers.

Should you be vaccinated?

If you are in a high risk group, or are in a sexual relationship with a person in a high risk

Hepatitis B

Sexually Transmitted Diseases Services

Royal Adelaide Hospital

Free and confidential advice, testing and treatment for all STDs including HIV/AIDS

No appointment necessary

Monday, Thursday & Friday

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Telephone

08 8222 5075

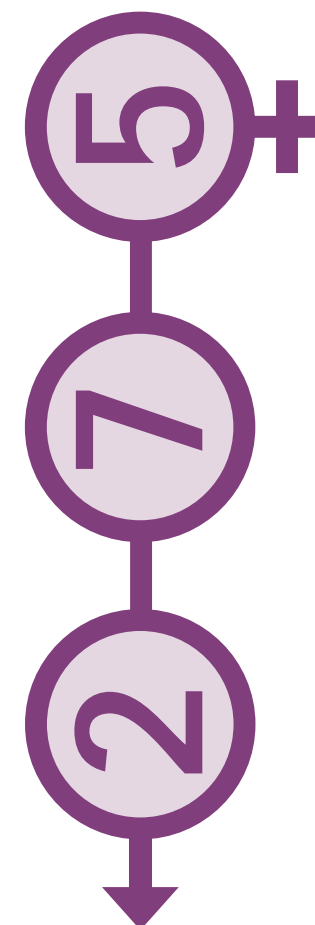
Toll free country call
1800 806 490

email

std.services@dhs.sa.gov.au

web site

www.stdservices.on.net



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group, you should be vaccinated.

Clinic 275 offers vaccination if you or your regular sex partner(s) are in a high risk group.

In addition, people infected with hepatitis C virus may be offered vaccination (because hepatitis B infection may be more severe in these people).

Others at risk, such as health workers and people from countries where hepatitis B is common (e.g. Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Pacific Islands), should see their local doctor, council, or community health centre for advice and vaccination.

What is vaccination?

Vaccination requires 3 injections over 6 months. You need to complete the course for full protection. If you do not return on time for a vaccination, the clinic can send you a reminder, if you choose. After a complete vaccination course, most people will be immune to hepatitis B for the rest of their life. Booster doses of vaccine are no longer recommended.

You should not be vaccinated when you have a high temperature. Wait until you are well.

Usually there is little reaction to the vaccine. However, some people have a sore arm at the vaccine site. A few people may have a headache, diarrhoea or simply feel unwell.

Results of vaccination

You will be protected against hepatitis B infection. If you come into contact with the hepatitis B virus, you will not become unwell, nor will you become a carrier of the virus.

You will not be protected against hepatitis C virus, hepatitis A virus, HIV, or any other sexually transmitted infection.

More information

The Hepatitis Alphabet

by Sievert, Korman and Bolin, 1994

Gore & Osment, publisher

(\$9.95 at time of printing)

STD Services web site:

-//stdservices.on.net/std/hepatitis_b

Gastroenterological Society of Australia:

www.gesa.org.au

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