

Hepatitis B

What is the hepatitis B virus?

The hepatitis B virus infects the liver. You can get hepatitis B from blood and body fluids such as saliva and semen. If a pregnant woman is infected with hepatitis B, her baby may be infected at birth.

How can I tell if I have hepatitis B?

Usually, you can't tell. Most people don't have any symptoms. You may feel tired, your stomach may hurt sometimes, or your skin may look yellow. Rarely, you may have a headache, fever, nausea, vomiting, or stomach pains.

What happens if I get hepatitis B?

Most adults get better in a few weeks or a few months. Some who are infected feel like they are getting better, but the virus stays in their liver. These people have chronic hepatitis B. The younger you are when you get infected, the more likely you are to get chronic infection.

What health problems can chronic hepatitis B cause?

Children and adults with chronic hepatitis B can look healthy for years, but their liver cells are being slowly damaged. If enough damage happens, they get cancer of the liver or cirrhosis (sir-ROW-sis). Cirrhosis is scarring of the liver. These diseases can be fatal.

What are the treatment options?

Several medicines taken by mouth or injection can help fight chronic hepatitis B and lessen the chance of liver damage. If you have chronic hepatitis B, talk to your doctor about which medicine is best for you. If your liver has been badly damaged, a liver transplant may also be an option.

How can I protect my liver if I have chronic hepatitis B?

Don't drink alcohol, and see your doctor regularly. Tell your doctor about all the medicines you are taking, including over-the-counter and herbal medicines. Some medicines can hurt your liver. Depending on the results of your blood tests, you may be able to take medicines to help stop the virus from causing more liver damage. Your doctor may recommend testing for hepatitis C infection and may offer you a vaccine for hepatitis A.

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

Don't share needles or have unprotected sex. There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B. Ask your doctor if you should be vaccinated. Most children in the United States routinely get this vaccine.

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <https://familydoctor.org>.

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What if I have hepatitis B and get pregnant?

Many women don't find out they have chronic hepatitis B until they are tested during pregnancy. If you are infected during pregnancy, your doctor may recommend you start a medicine to treat it and decrease the risk of spreading the infection to your baby. After delivery, your baby should be given a medicine called hepatitis B immune globulin and the first dose of the hepatitis B vaccine. These lower the chance of your baby getting infected. More doses of the vaccine will be given when your child is older. You can't pass the hepatitis B virus to your baby in breast milk, so breastfeeding is safe.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

AAFP's Patient Information Resource

<https://familydoctor.org/condition/hepatitis-b/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hbv/index.htm>

National Library of Medicine's Medline Plus

<https://medlineplus.gov/hepatitisb.html>

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