

## ***HEPATITIS B***

Hepatitis B is the name given to a virus that causes the liver to become inflamed. Most people fight off the infection themselves. However, approximately 5-10% of those people who are infected with the virus will become carriers and will go on to develop cirrhosis and possibly cancer of the liver.

There are over a million carriers of the hepatitis B virus in the United States and an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people who are infected annually.

This disease is more infectious than AIDS and is transmitted through infected blood and other body fluids (seminal fluid, vaginal secretions, breast milk, tears and saliva). However, in approximately 30-40% of cases the method of transmission is unknown.

### **Protection Against Hepatitis B**

You can protect yourself against hepatitis B with a safe and effective vaccine. To be fully protected three injections are required; the second one a month after the first injection and the third one six months later. Hepatitis B vaccination shots are recommended for all newborns, infants and teenagers. Shots may be given at any age. Most cases of hepatitis B occur among sexually active young adults, therefore, teenagers are an important group to be vaccinated. This vaccine provides immunity for ten and possibly 20 years.

### **How Do You Catch Hepatitis B?**

People who are exposed to blood or body fluids of an infected person are at risk. You may also be at risk if you -

- are exposed to blood on the job - first aid or emergency worker, funeral director, police personnel, dentist or dental assistant, medical personnel, etc.;
- live in the same household with an infected person;
- have sex with a carrier or chronically infected person;
- use intravenous drugs;
- have more than one sex partner;
- received a blood transfusion prior to 1975 (when a test to screen blood was developed);
- have hemophilia;
- work or are a patient in a health or long term care facility;
- work or are incarcerated in a prison;
- travel to countries with a high incidence of hepatitis B.

Ethnic or racial groups with a high rate of infection are: Non-Hispanic Blacks, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, American Indians and Alaskan Natives.

*How To Avoid Becoming Infected*

- get vaccinated (make certain you get all three injections);
- use condoms;
- wear gloves when touching or cleaning up blood on personal items, tissues, tampons or other items;
- clean area with blood on it with one part household bleach and 10 parts water;
- don't share razors, toothbrushes or pierced earrings with anyone;
- don't share chewing gum or pre-chew food for a baby;
- make certain any needles for drugs, ear piercing or tattooing are properly sterilized.

*Hepatitis B Is Not Spread By Casual Contact Such As:*

- holding hands;
- kissing on the cheek or dry lip kissing;
- eating food prepared by a carrier;
- visiting an infected person;
- playing with a child who is a carrier;
- sneezing or coughing.

*Many Don't Know How They Become Infected*

An estimated 40% of people who have been infected with hepatitis B do not know how or when they became infected.

*How Do You Know You Have Hepatitis B?*

Most people who get hepatitis B have no recognizable signs or symptoms. The only way the disease can be positively identified is through a blood test. Many people are surprised to learn when they have donated blood that they test positive for hepatitis B.

Hepatitis blood tests are not usually included in routine blood tests done when having a physical examination.

*Some People Have Symptoms That Mimic The Flu*

- loss of appetite;
- nausea and vomiting;
- fever;
- weakness, tiredness, lasting weeks or even months;
- abdominal pain;
- dark urine;
- yellowing skin and eyes (Jaundice);

*Will I Get Over Hepatitis B?*

About 90% of adults recover from hepatitis B in a few months, clearing the virus from their system and developing an immunity. They will never get hepatitis B again, however, their blood test will always show that they had been infected and blood centers will not accept their blood. When the Anti-HBs (antibody to hepatitis B surface antigen) test is positive or reactive it means the person has recovered from a past infection, will not get it again, therefore cannot pass it on to others. This test is usually positive when a person has received the hepatitis B vaccine.

*What If My Body Can't Fight Off The Infection?*

About 10% of adults and 25-50% of the young children (under 5 years) infected with hepatitis B who are unable to clear the infection from their bodies in six months become carriers or chronically infected with hepatitis B.

*What Is A Carrier?*

An HBV carrier is someone who has had hepatitis B in her/his blood for more than six months. Children who are infected under age five have a 30% chance of becoming lifelong carriers. A carrier usually has no signs or symptoms of HBV but remains infected with the virus for years or for a lifetime and is capable of passing the disease on to others. Sometimes HBV carriers will spontaneously clear the infection from their bodies, but most will not. Although most carriers have no serious problems with hepatitis B and lead normal healthy lives, some carriers do become sick because they are at significantly higher risk than the general population for liver failure or liver cancer. Because you are carrying the virus you should not donate blood, plasma, body organs, tissue or sperm.

*What Can A Carrier Do?*

A carrier is infectious even though he/she has no signs or symptoms and should never have unprotected sex unless the other person is immune to hepatitis B or has been vaccinated. Remember the virus is present in blood, semen, vaginal fluids and saliva. Annual liver functions tests and a test for cancer are recommended. Alcohol can harm the liver and should be avoided. Drugs, even over the counter ones, should be used under a doctor's supervision as they too may cause liver damage. A well balanced diet and regular exercise are important.

*What If I Am Told I Am Chronically Infected?*

Anyone who has not cleared the virus after six months and has elevated liver enzymes is considered to have chronic active hepatitis.

This means the virus is continuing to attack liver cells and replacing them with scar tissue, called cirrhosis. The build up of cirrhosis causes the liver to become hard and bumpy and distorts the blood flow through this vital organ. This causes a back pressure in the veins bringing nutrients from the stomach and intestines. Varicose veins form in the stomach and esophagus that can burst causing a hemorrhage resulting in vomiting blood or passing black stools. About 5,000 people die in the United States each year related to hepatitis B, 1,000 die of hepatitis B related liver cancer.

See your doctor yearly or more frequent as recommended. Tell your doctor, dentist and sex partner you are a carrier of hepatitis.

*Can Hepatitis B Be Cured?*

Currently there is only one approved treatment for hepatitis B called interferon. It is successful in controlling the disease in about 40% of those treated. Many other medications are being tested to find more effective and less toxic treatments.

*What About Pregnancy And Hepatitis B?*

Up to 90% of pregnant women who are carriers of hepatitis B can pass it on to their newborns at delivery. All pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B and all babies should be vaccinated at birth to protect the child from being infected and to provide immunity for at least 10 years.

*Can You Get Hepatitis B A Second Time?*

There are several different hepatitis viruses, A,B,C,D & E. They all attack the liver and can cause liver cell injury. Once infected and recovered from one of these infections you will not get it a second time. However, some people who have chronic hepatitis feel better at times and worse at other's.

*Where Do You Get The Vaccine?*

Many doctors have the vaccine available, but it is always better to check with them when you make your appointment.

Public health departments will vaccinate children (any uninsured children under 18) free and will charge a nominal fee for anyone including older adults.

Small children need smaller doses of vaccine so the shots will be less expensive than adults. Prices vary so shop around.

Hepatitis B vaccine is only for people who are not infected. Once infected, the vaccine is of no use.

For further information or referrals to specialists, call or write:

American Liver Foundation  
1425 Pompton Avenue  
Cedar Grove, NJ 07009  
1-800-223-0179 - 201-256-2550