

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a disease that affects your liver. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus. Most people who get hepatitis B can get rid of the virus on their own. But others can develop chronic (or *lifelong*) hepatitis B.

Who is at risk for hepatitis B?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say that these groups are more likely to get hepatitis B:

- Persons with multiple sex partners or diagnosis of a sexually transmitted disease
- Men who have sex with men
- Sex contacts of infected persons
- Injection drug users
- Household contacts of chronically infected persons
- Infants born to infected mothers
- Infants and children of immigrants from areas with high rates of hepatitis B, particularly Africa, Asia, Alaska, and parts of South America
- Health care and public safety workers
- Hemodialysis patients (or *people who use a kidney machine*)

How can I protect myself against hepatitis B?

◆ **Get vaccinated**

There is a vaccine that protects you from getting hepatitis B. You get it in three different shots. Most people who get these shots develop *antibodies*. Antibodies are cells that your body makes to fight certain diseases. These antibodies will protect you against hepatitis B. If you already got vaccinated or if you are not sure, talk with your doctor (or *health care provider*). Your health care provider can check to see if you have antibodies against hepatitis B.

◆ **Avoid high-risk behaviors**

High-risk behaviors are things that some people do that make them more likely to get a disease. You can get hepatitis B through contact with (or *by touching*) the blood of a person who has the disease. You can also get hepatitis B through contact with other body fluids like semen and vaginal fluids. For example, you can get hepatitis B by having sex or sharing needles with a person who has the disease.

◆ **Practice safer sex**

Use condoms every time you have sex.

◆ **Don't shoot drugs**

If you are using drugs now, try to get help to stop. VA has programs to help you. If you cannot stop, then don't share needles and works.

◆ **Don't share personal care items like razors, toothbrushes, and nail clippers**



If you can stop high-risk behaviors like these, it can also prevent you from getting other viruses like HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and hepatitis C virus. Please speak with your doctor or nurse to get more information about these viruses.

Will I know it if I have hepatitis B?

Not necessarily. You may have hepatitis B and not have any symptoms. You can still spread the virus to others even if you don't have symptoms. Some people who do have symptoms might have the following:

- Yellowing skin or eyes (or *jaundice*)
- Not feeling hungry
- Feeling tired
- Muscle, joint, or stomach pain
- Stomach upset, diarrhea, or vomiting

Can I get tested for hepatitis B at VA?

Yes. You can be tested for hepatitis B at your VA medical center. This test is done by taking a sample of your blood.

What tests will I have to do?

Your doctor may ask you to do the following tests:

◆ **Hepatitis B surface antibody (*Anti-HBs*)**

If this test is positive, it means that

- you have antibodies against hepatitis B and are safe from getting the disease
- you were either vaccinated against hepatitis B or exposed to it at some point in your lifetime

◆ **Hepatitis B core antibody (*Anti-HBc*)**

If the test is positive, it means that

- you have been exposed to hepatitis B and have developed an antibody to only part of the virus
- they will do more tests to find out if you have the disease

◆ **Hepatitis B surface antigen (*HBsAg*)**

If this test is positive, it means that

- you do have hepatitis B
- you can spread the virus to others

◆ **Hepatitis B e antigen (*HBeAg*)**

If this test is positive, it means that

- you have high levels of virus in your blood
- you may be very contagious to others

Is hepatitis B serious?

Yes. Although many people who are exposed to hepatitis B will be able to get rid of the virus, some people can develop chronic (or *lifelong*) hepatitis B. This may lead to liver damage, liver cancer, and death.

Is there a cure for chronic hepatitis B?

No, there is no reliable cure for chronic hepatitis B, but there are treatments available.

Can I get vaccinated against hepatitis B at my VA medical center?

Yes, speak with your primary health care provider about your risk for hepatitis B. Your doctor can check to see if you already have immunity (or *are protected*) against hepatitis B and, if not, can vaccinate you. It is especially important to get vaccinated against hepatitis B if you have HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) or hepatitis C.

Can I get medicine to treat chronic hepatitis B?

Sometimes a medicine called interferon is used to treat chronic hepatitis B. A medicine called lamivudine is also used. Sometimes both are used together. These medicines are not right for everyone. If you have chronic hepatitis B, speak with your doctor to see if treatment is right for you.

Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line at 1-888-4-HEPCDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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IB 10-153 Revised June 2004*