

# Hepatitis B Information for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders

## What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by infection with hepatitis B virus (HBV). HBV infection can cause lifelong liver damage and even death. HBV infection is common in many places throughout the world, including Asia, the Pacific Islands, Alaska, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and areas of South America.

## Why is HBV infection dangerous?

Babies and young children who are infected are likely to develop lifelong infection. This lifelong infection is called chronic HBV infection and can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver failure, and liver cancer later in life. Chronic HBV infection develops in as many as 9 of 10 infected infants, 3 out of 10 young children, and about 2 out of 100 infected adults. Though people with chronic HBV infection might not feel sick, they carry the virus in their blood and can pass it to others.

## How is HBV spread from one person to another?

HBV is spread when blood or body fluids, such as semen or vaginal secretions from a person infected with HBV enters the body of a person who is not infected. For example, HBV can be spread by:

- an infected mother to her child during birth
- having sex with an infected person without using a condom
- coming in contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person
- being bitten by an HBV-infected person
- sharing a household with a person who has chronic HBV infection
- sharing items such as razors, toothbrushes, washcloths, or other personal care items
- pre-chewing food for babies
- sharing chewing gum
- sharing syringes, needles, drugs, cotton, spoons, or water to inject drugs
- using unsterilized needles in ear or body piercing, tattooing, or acupuncture
- using needles that have been used on someone else

HBV is not spread through food, beverages, sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, coughing, sneezing, or casual contact.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Most babies and children who get HBV infection don't have symptoms and don't look or feel sick. Most adults (7 of 10)

who get infected have symptoms of hepatitis B. If people do have symptoms, they might experience any or all of the following:

- loss of appetite
- yellowing of skin and eyes (jaundice)
- nausea, vomiting
- fever
- weakness, tiredness, inability to work for weeks or months
- abdominal pain
- joint pain
- dark urine
- clay-colored bowel movements

## How do you know if you have HBV infection?

Only a blood test can tell for sure. Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) children and adults are at high risk for being infected with HBV. Many may already have been infected. You need to have your blood tested to find out if you've been infected in the past or are infected now.

## What should you know if you are an Asian American or Pacific Islander?

All foreign-born people (including immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and internationally adopted children) born in Asia, the Pacific Islands, Africa, and other regions in the world with high rates of HBV infection should be tested for HBV infection, even if they've been vaccinated. Three blood tests often used by healthcare professionals are the following:

- hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg)
- hepatitis B surface antibody (antiHBs)
- hepatitis B core antibody (antiHBc)

If the tests show that the person hasn't already been infected, then the person can be vaccinated against hepatitis B. If the tests show that the person was previously infected but fought off the infection and is now immune, nothing more needs to be done. If the HBsAg test shows that the person is currently infected with HBV, a healthcare professional who is experienced in the care of persons with liver disease should evaluate the person further.

In recent years, large numbers of Asian immigrants and refugees in various Asian communities across the United States have been tested. These are the results.

- About 1 of 7 people tested is infected and can infect others.
- About 1 of 2 people tested had been infected at one time but have cleared the infection from their bodies and won't get infected again. They cannot spread HBV infection to

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others.

- About one 1 of 3 people had never been infected and need hepatitis B vaccine to be protected.

### How can you prevent HBV infection?

Hepatitis B vaccination is the best protection. The vaccine can be given safely to infants, children, and adults and is usually given as three doses over about 6 months. Other flexible schedules are available. Pregnant women can be given this vaccine as well. Hepatitis B vaccine is very safe, and side effects are rare. This vaccine is the first vaccine that prevents cancer; it prevents liver cancer caused by HBV infection.

### Is hepatitis B vaccine safe?

More than one billion doses of hepatitis B vaccine have been given worldwide. In the United States, more than 30 million adults and 40 million infants and children have received this vaccine. The vaccination sometimes causes a sore arm, but serious reactions are very rare.

### Who should get hepatitis B vaccine?

The following people should be protected with hepatitis B vaccine:

- All babies, starting in the hospital at birth. Babies should receive the first dose of vaccine in the hospital. If the mother is infected with HBV, her newborn infant **must** get the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine within 12 hours of birth, along with another injection called hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG). This will protect almost all newborns from getting infected with HBV. All infants will need another dose of hepatitis B vaccine at 1–2 months of age and will complete the vaccination series at age 6 months (24 weeks) or later. All babies should receive a total of 3 or 4 doses of hepatitis B vaccine (depending on which vaccine your healthcare professional uses). If a mother is infected with HBV, her baby's blood should be tested for HBsAg and anti-HBs after completion of at least 3 doses of a licensed hepatitis B vaccine series, at age 9–18 months (generally at the next well child visit) to make sure that the vaccine worked.
- All children ages 0–18 years who have not been vaccinated. This is especially important for AAPI children because of the high rates of HBV infection in the various AAPI communities. Foreign-born AAPI children should have their blood tested to find out if they've been infected.
- Any adults who want to be protected from HBV infection should be vaccinated as well.
- People of any age whose behavior or job puts them at increased risk for HBV infection such as people who
  - have sex with more than one partner
  - have sex with someone infected with HBV
  - shoot drugs

- are men who have sex with men
- are HIV-infected
- live in the same house with someone who has chronic HBV infection
- have a job that involves contact with human blood
- are clients in a home for the developmentally disabled
- have hemophilia
- travel to areas where hepatitis B is common

### Where can you go to receive hepatitis B vaccination?

First, check with your healthcare professional or clinic. Children's health insurance plans usually cover the cost of this vaccine since it is recommended routinely for all U.S. children. If your child is uninsured, ask your healthcare professional or local health department for assistance. For adults, contact your clinic to find out how much the vaccine will cost or if the vaccine is covered under your health plan. If you are uninsured, call your local health department for advice. When you go to any medical appointment, it is important to bring your vaccination records with you.

### How can you take care of yourself if you have chronic HBV infection?

Every six months, you should see a healthcare professional who has experience in care of patients with liver disease. The doctor will do blood tests to check the health of your liver as well as test for signs of liver cancer. It is best for you to avoid alcohol because alcohol can injure your liver. Additionally, your doctor should know about all the medicines you are taking, even over-the-counter medicines, because some medicines can hurt your liver. If the results of any liver tests are abnormal, make an appointment with a liver specialist to find out if you need further tests or treatment. There are several medicines to treat chronic hepatitis B that might help reduce your risk for liver failure and liver cancer.

### If you are infected, what can you do to protect others?

All the people you live with and your sex partner(s) should get tested for HBV infection and vaccinated if they have not already been infected. (Hepatitis B vaccination will not harm a person who has already been HBV-infected.) People with HBV infection might feel healthy, but they can still infect others. It is also important to protect others from contact with your infected blood and other infectious body fluids, including semen and vaginal fluids. Sweat, tears, urine, and mucus or saliva from sneezing, coughing, or drooling do not contain HBV. Human bites from infected persons have transmitted HBV.

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## Important DO's and DON'Ts for people with chronic HBV infection

### DO's

- Cover all cuts and open sores with a bandage.
- Carefully discard used items, such as bandaids and menstrual pads, so no one is accidentally exposed to your blood.
- Wash your hands well after touching your blood or infectious body fluids.
- Clean up blood spills; then clean the area again with a bleach solution (one part household chlorine bleach to 10 parts water).
- Tell your sex partner(s) you have hepatitis B so your partner(s) can be tested and vaccinated (if not already infected). Sex partners should be tested 1–2 months after receiving three doses of vaccine to be sure the vaccine worked.
- Use condoms (rubbers) during sex, unless your sex partner has had hepatitis B or has had three doses of hepatitis B vaccine and has had a blood test showing that s/he is protected. (Condoms might also protect you from other sexually transmitted diseases.)
- Tell the persons you live with to see their healthcare professional for testing and vaccination for hepatitis B.
- Tell all of your healthcare professionals that you are chronically infected with HBV.
- See your healthcare professional every 6–12 months to screen you for signs of liver disease, including liver cancer.

If you are pregnant, be sure to tell your healthcare professional that you have HBV infection. It is very important that your baby get hepatitis B vaccine and hepatitis B immune globulin within 12 hours of birth and that you get ongoing care for your HBV infection as well.

### DON'Ts

- Don't share chewing gum, toothbrushes, razors, washcloths, needles for ear or body piercing, or anything that might have come in contact with your blood or infectious body fluids.
- Don't pre-chew food for babies.
- Don't share syringes, needles, drugs or "works" such as cotton, spoons, and water.
- Don't donate blood, plasma, body organs, tissue, or sperm.

## If you have questions, contact one of these trusted resources:

- **American Liver Foundation**  
(212) 668-1000  
[www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org)
- **Asian American Hepatitis B Program, NYC**  
[www.bfreenyc.org](http://www.bfreenyc.org)
- **Asian Liver Center at Stanford University**  
(888) 311-3331  
<http://liver.stanford.edu>
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
(800) CDC-INFO (800) 232-4636  
[www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis) (Division of Viral Hepatitis)  
[www.cdc.gov/vaccines](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines) (National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases)
- **Hepatitis B Foundation**  
(215) 489-4900  
[www.hepb.org](http://www.hepb.org)
- **Hepatitis B Initiative**  
[www.hepbinitiative.org](http://www.hepbinitiative.org)
- **Hepatitis Foundation International**  
(800) 891-0707  
[www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)
- **Immunization Action Coalition/Hepatitis B Coalition**  
(651) 647-9009  
[www.vaccineinformation.org](http://www.vaccineinformation.org)  
[www.immunize.org](http://www.immunize.org)  
[www.hepprograms.org/apia](http://www.hepprograms.org/apia)
- **National Institutes of Health's "Asian American Health" website**  
<http://asianamericanhealth.nlm.nih.gov>
- **National Task Force on Hepatitis B: Focus on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders**  
[www.hepbtaskforce.org](http://www.hepbtaskforce.org)
- **Parents of Kids with Infectious Diseases (PKIDS)**  
(877) 55-PKIDS (877) 557-5437  
[www.pkids.org](http://www.pkids.org)