

Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that infects the liver causing it to become inflamed. It is very infectious, more so than the HIV (AIDS) virus.

How serious is the problem?

It is very epidemic in some parts of the world and is now on the increase in the world.

Most people with hepatitis B recover, although some have a long and serious illness; 5 to 10% of sufferers become carriers. It may be fatal in people who get cirrhosis or cancer of the liver from it. Hepatitis B is especially serious for infants who acquire it.

What is a carrier?

A *carrier* is a person who has not been able to get rid of the virus from his or her body and is diagnosed by blood tests. Carriers are a risk to other people and have a responsibility to tell dentists, doctors and other people about this. The doctor will advise on how to cope.

What are the symptoms?

This depends on whether the attack of hepatitis is *acute* or *chronic*. The acute attack produces a flu-like illness and yellow skin (jaundice). In some cases there may be anorexia, nausea, vomiting, pain in the right upper abdomen and joint pain. The chronic form comes on slowly and is more serious. It may take months from the time you get the virus until the illness develops.

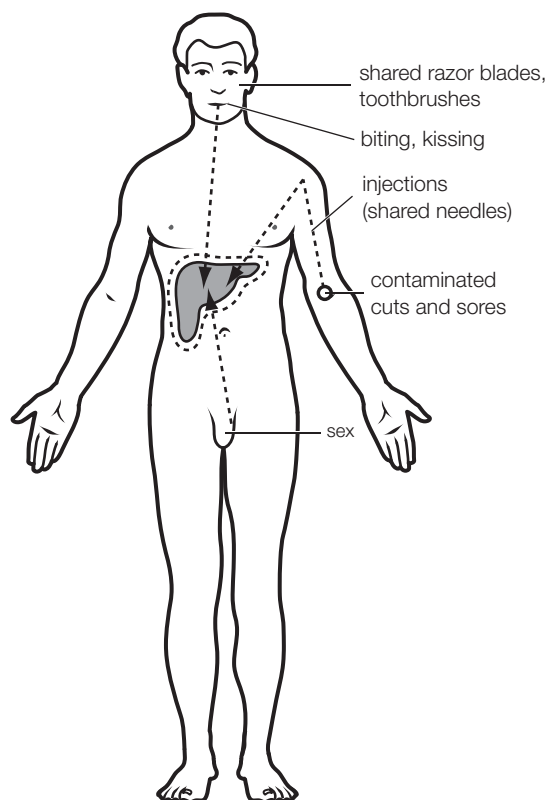
Some people may never have symptoms.

How is it spread?

The virus is carried in all body fluids: blood, saliva, semen and vaginal secretions, breast milk, tears and perspiration. It is usually picked up by absorption of infected blood through cuts and sores in the skin, by sexual intercourse or by sharing infected items such as razor blades, toothbrushes, needles and syringes. Procedures such as ear piercing and tattooing can also spread it. The most common ways are through intravenous drug use and sexual intercourse with carriers.

Who is at highest risk?

- Intravenous drug users
- Male homosexuals
- Heterosexuals and bisexuals with multiple sex partners
- Sex industry workers
- Prisoners and other institutionalised people
- Certain ethnic groups
- Health-care workers (e.g. doctors, dentists, nurses)
- Babies born to carrier mothers (a serious problem)
- Children in kindergartens and schools, especially where exposed to a variety of people



Transmission of hepatitis B

Is there a cure?

- There is no easy cure, but it can be prevented.
- Prevention is done by good hygiene and vaccination.

Good hygiene

- Do not share personal items (e.g. razors, toothbrushes).
- Use a condom for sex.
- Be careful not to get another's blood on cuts or wounds.
- Do not share needles.

Vaccination

This involves a course of 3 injections. It can be combined with hepatitis A vaccine.

What is the treatment?

Carriers should follow the 'good hygiene' guidelines. They should eat a normal healthy diet and reduce any alcohol to no more than one standard drink per day. Any drug dependence should be treated.

Regular liver function blood tests monitor progress. If there is liver damage, interferon and an antiviral drug such as lamivudine is usually prescribed.

Remember

- A blood test can tell whether you have immunity or are a carrier.
- Talk to your doctor about the prevention of hepatitis B.
- Be responsible and inform your contacts.