

HEPATITIS B AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

Hepatitis B is a liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis B virus (HBV). It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness. Hepatitis B is usually spread when blood, semen, or another body fluid from a person infected with the Hepatitis B virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. This can happen through sexual contact with an infected person or sharing needles, syringes, or other drug-injection equipment. Hepatitis B can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby at birth.

Hepatitis B can be either acute or chronic. Acute HBV infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the Hepatitis B virus. Acute infection can — but does not always — lead to chronic infection. Chronic HBV infection is a long-term illness that occurs when the Hepatitis B virus remains in a person's body. Chronic HBV is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, and even death.

The best way to prevent HBV infection is by getting vaccinated.

How common is hepatitis B in the United States?

About 800,000 to 1.4 million persons in the United States have chronic HBV infection. Each year 38,000 more people, mostly young adults, get infected with HBV and almost 2,000 people die from chronic HBV.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluid infected with the hepatitis B virus enters the body of a person who is not infected. People can become infected with the virus during activities such as:

- Birth (spread from an infected mother to her baby during birth)
- Sex with an infected partner
- Sharing needles, syringes, or other drug-injection equipment
- Sharing items such as razors or toothbrushes with an infected person
- Direct contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person
- Exposure to blood from needle sticks or other sharp instruments.

Hepatitis B is not spread by sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing or sneezing.

Many people with chronic HBV do not know that are infected since they do not feel or look sick. However, they can still spread the virus to others and are at risk of serious health problems themselves.

Who is at risk for hepatitis B?

Although anyone can get hepatitis B, some people are at greater risk, such as those who:

- Have sex with an infected person
- Have multiple sex partners
- Have a sexually transmitted disease
- Are men who have sexual contact with other men



- Inject drugs or share needles, syringes, or other drug equipment
- Live with a person who has chronic hepatitis B
- Are exposed to blood on the job
- Are hemodialysis patients
- Travel to countries with moderate to high rates of hepatitis B

Does acute hepatitis B cause symptoms?

Sometimes. Although a majority of adults develop symptoms from acute hepatitis B infection, many young children do not. Symptoms of acute hepatitis B, if they appear, can include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements, joint pain, and jaundice (yellow color in the skin or eyes). Symptoms usually last a few weeks, but some people can be ill for as long as 6 months.

What are the symptoms of chronic hepatitis B?

Some people have ongoing symptoms similar to acute hepatitis B, but most individuals with chronic hepatitis B remain symptom free for as long as 20 or 30 years. About 15%--25% of people with chronic hepatitis B develop serious liver conditions, such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer.

Can hepatitis B be prevented?

Yes. The best way to prevent hepatitis B is by getting the hepatitis B vaccine. Many physicians offer the vaccine to patients seen in their offices.

Who should get vaccinated against hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B vaccination is recommended for:

- All infants, starting with the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine at birth
- All children and adolescents younger than 19 years of age who have not been vaccinated
- People whose sex partners have hepatitis B
- Sexually active persons who are not in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship
- Persons seeking evaluation or treatment for a sexually transmitted disease
- Men who have sexual contact with other men
- People who share needles, syringes, or other drug-injection equipment
- People who have close household contact with someone infected with the hepatitis B virus
- Healthcare and public safety workers at risk for exposure to blood or blood-contaminated body fluids on the job
- People with end-stage renal disease, including pre-dialysis, hemodialysis, peritoneal dialysis, and home dialysis
- Residents and staff of facilities for developmentally disabled persons
- Travelers to countries with intermediate or high prevalence rates of hepatitis B
- People with chronic liver disease
- People with HIV infection
- Unvaccinated adults with diabetes mellitus
- Anyone who wishes to be protected from hepatitis B virus infection.

Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?

Yes the hepatitis B vaccine is safe. Soreness at the injection site is the most common side effect reported, along with a low grade fever. A vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as allergic reactions. However, the potential risks associated with hepatitis B are much greater than the risks the vaccine poses. Since the vaccine became available in 1982, more than 100 million people have received hepatitis B vaccine in the United States and no serious side effects have been reported.

People who have ever had a life-threatening allergic reaction to baker's yeast (the kind used to make bread) or to a previous dose of hepatitis B vaccine should not get the vaccine. People who are moderately to severely ill at the time the shot is scheduled should wait until they recover before getting the vaccine.

College students and their parents should discuss the risks and the benefits of vaccination with their healthcare providers. If college students decide to be vaccinated against hepatitis B, they (or their parents if they are less than 18 years of age) should contact their healthcare provider or the university/college student health center where they will be attending to inquire about receiving the vaccine.

For more information about the hepatitis B vaccine access the Vaccine Information Statement at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site:

<http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/hcp/vis/vis-statements/hep-b.html>.

Adapted from material on the CDC Web site:

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/index.htm>