

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver caused by one of many hepatitis viruses. In British Columbia, the most common types are hepatitis A, B and C. Hepatitis B is passed through contact with blood and body fluids. The virus can be found in body fluids such as blood, semen, pre-ejaculate, and vaginal fluids.

Hepatitis B is preventable with vaccination. It's a good idea to check your immunization records to make sure that your vaccines are up-to-date, as there is no cure for hepatitis B.

*Most adults get hepatitis B for a short time and then get better. This is called **acute** hepatitis B. Sometimes, hepatitis B causes a long-term infection, called **chronic** hepatitis B. While most adults clear the virus, babies and young children are more likely to get chronic hepatitis B.*

Causes

Hepatitis B can be passed through vaginal, oral, and anal sexual contact. This includes both penetrative sex and sexual activities where there is an exchange of body fluids. You can also get hepatitis B by sharing sex toys.

Hepatitis B can be passed when sharing drug equipment, such as needles. You can get hepatitis B if you share toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or other items that have blood on them. Hepatitis B can also be passed through getting tattoos, body-piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis with equipment that is not properly sterilized.

You cannot get hepatitis B from casual contact such as hugging, kissing, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food or drinks.

If you have hepatitis B, you can pass it to others even if you don't have symptoms.

Symptoms

If you have hepatitis B, it is common to not notice any symptoms. If you do have symptoms, they will most likely show up 45 to 160 days after coming into contact with hepatitis B. It may feel like you have the flu. The most common symptoms include:

- loss of appetite, nausea and sometimes vomiting
- stomach pain
- fatigue
- mild fever
- headache
- muscle aches and joint pain
- skin rash

- yellowish eyes and skin (jaundice) that usually appears after other symptoms have started to go away

Most people with chronic (long-term) hepatitis B do not have any symptoms.

Tests and Diagnosis

Testing for hepatitis B is done with a blood sample. Testing can tell if you currently have hepatitis B, if you have had it in the past, or if you have had the vaccine to prevent the virus. It is best to get tested for hepatitis B if you:

- have symptoms
- have a household or sexual partner who has tested positive for acute or chronic hepatitis B
- have shared drug equipment such as needles
- are pregnant

Window Period (how long to wait before testing):

Most test results are accurate 4 to 12 weeks after you come into contact with hepatitis B. In British Columbia, most test results should be ready in 10 days.

Treatment

In most cases, hepatitis B goes away on its own. There is no specific treatment for acute (short-term) hepatitis B. Talk to your health care provider about which medicines and herbal products to avoid to prevent further harm to your liver.

Most people with chronic hepatitis B can live active, full lives by taking good care of themselves and getting regular checkups. There are medicines for chronic hepatitis B, but they may not be right for everyone. The goal of treatment is to reduce the risk of serious complications, such as cirrhosis and liver cancer. Talk with a health care provider that specializes in viral hepatitis about what treatment option may be best for you.

Complications

Hepatitis B infection can lead to serious complications including:

- liver scarring (cirrhosis)
- liver cancer
- in rare cases, liver failure and death

Pregnancy: If you are pregnant, you should be screened for hepatitis B. You can pass hepatitis B to your child during birth. If you have hepatitis B, breast/chest-feeding is usually still encouraged, but talk to your health care provider.

Prevention

You can protect yourself from hepatitis B by getting a vaccine. In British Columbia, the vaccine is free as part of routine immunizations given to infants and to children who are in Grade 6 and who have not been given the vaccine before. The vaccine is also given to teenagers and adults who have a higher chance of getting hepatitis B because of medical conditions, occupation or lifestyle.

You should check your immunization record to make sure your vaccinations are up-to-date. A combination vaccine that protects against both hepatitis B and hepatitis A is also available, but it is not free. All people who have hepatitis B should also get the hepatitis A vaccine.

If you come in contact with the blood or body fluids of someone who has hepatitis B, contact your health care provider as soon as possible. There is post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) medication that may stop you from getting the infection.

To prevent hepatitis B, you can:

- use condoms
- make sure your vaccinations are up to date
- do not share drug equipment, such as needles
- use new drug equipment every time you use drugs
- use new supplies for tattoos and body piercings
- do not share toothbrushes, razors, or any other household products that may have blood on them

It is a good idea to get tested regularly for STIs, especially if you have new partners or open relationships. Talking with partners about safer sex makes sure everyone knows what to expect. Condoms are great if they work for you – the correct use of condoms can reduce your chances of getting and passing hepatitis B.

Resources

HealthLink BC – Information about the Hepatitis B vaccine in multiple languages

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hepatitis-b-vaccine>

ImmunizeBC – Information about the Hepatitis B vaccine

<https://immunizebc.ca/hepatitis-b>

CATIE – Hepatitis B factsheet

<http://www.catie.ca/en/fact-sheets/sti/hepatitis-b>

SmartSexResource – If you are worried or have anxiety about hepatitis B

<https://smartsexresource.com/topics/worry-and-anxiety>

TransCareBC – Gender-affirming sexual and reproductive health information
<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/care-support/access-care/sexual-hlth>