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Hepatitis B virus infection

What is hepatitis B virus infection?

Hepatitis B is a disease of the liver caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV).

What are the symptoms?

After the virus enters your body, it may take weeks to months to develop symptoms or signs of illness. Symptoms of HBV infection may include fatigue, fever, nausea and vomiting, loss of appetite, tenderness to right upper side of the stomach area, dark urine, pale stools, joint pain and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes).

Many people who get hepatitis B show no symptoms and may not know they have the disease.

How common is hepatitis B virus infection?

There are very few new HBV infections each year due to B.C.'s routine infant, school-age and high-risk adult immunization programs.

Most chronic (long term) HBV infections occur in people who were born in countries with high levels of HBV infection. Examples include some areas of Asia, Africa, South America and the Caribbean.

How is hepatitis B virus spread?

HBV is spread through contact with the blood and other body fluids of someone with HBV infection. Blood, semen and vaginal fluid contain the highest amounts of virus. Transmission can occur through the following:

- Sharing items that may have blood on them such as a toothbrush, dental floss or razor
- Sexual contact with someone who is living with HBV
- Sharing equipment for drug snorting, smoking or injection with someone living with HBV. Examples include straws, pipes, spoons, cookers and needles
- During pregnancy to a baby before or during delivery

HBV is **not** spread by:

- Kissing, hugging or holding hands
- Using the same dishes or cutlery or sharing meals with someone with HBV infection
- Coughing or sneezing
- Through water or food

What should I do if I have been exposed to hepatitis B virus?

Visit your health care provider as soon as possible. If you have not completed a hepatitis B vaccine series or have not had HBV infection before, hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIg) and/or hepatitis B vaccine may be recommended.

If HBIg is recommended, it works best if given as soon as possible, ideally within 48 hours of exposure. Depending on the type of exposure, HBIg may be given up to 14 days after exposure.

How can I tell if I have HBV infection?

Your health care provider can order blood tests to see if you have a new HBV infection or if you have been infected with HBV before.

It can take 4 to 12 weeks after exposure to the virus for blood tests to show if you have been infected with HBV. Until your doctor has cleared you, you could spread HBV infection. Visit "What should I do if I have an HBV infection?", below, to learn how to prevent the spread of HBV.

If infected, most adults will clear the virus within 6 months and recover completely. This is called an acute HBV infection.

Less than 5 percent of healthy adults will develop chronic HBV infection. Most infants infected at birth will develop chronic infection. People with chronic HBV infection can pass the infection on to others. This long-term infection may lead to scarring of the liver, called cirrhosis, which can lead to liver failure and/or cancer in a small number of people.

What should I do if I have HBV infection?

If you have HBV infection, it is important to tell anyone who has been exposed to your blood or body fluids that you have HBV infection, including household members, sexual contacts or anyone you may have shared drug use equipment with. Depending upon the type of exposure and their immunization history, they may need to have blood tests and HBIg and/or hepatitis B vaccine.

There is no cure for chronic HBV infection, but there is treatment that can reduce the risk of serious complications such as damage to your liver. Regular visits to your health care provider will determine how your liver is functioning and if you need treatment. Ask for a blood test to check for hepatitis C and HIV infection. Also ask for vaccines that protect against hepatitis A, pneumococcal disease and influenza.

How can I prevent the spread of hepatitis B virus?

There are vaccines available to prevent HBV infection. The hepatitis B vaccine is recommended for, and provided free to a wide range of people in BC, including babies, people at increased risk of infection or serious illness, and people born in 1980 or later. Check with your health care provider to see if you are eligible for a free hepatitis B vaccine.

For more information about the hepatitis B vaccine, visit HealthLinkBC File #25a Hepatitis B Vaccine.

If you live with HBV, you can reduce the chance of passing this virus to others by doing the following:

- Talk to your health care provider if you are Spregnant, as there is a risk of passing the virus on to your baby. This risk can be greatly reduced by giving your baby HBIg and the first dose of the hepatitis B vaccine series at birth. Antiviral medications may be recommended for you before you give birth to further reduce the risk of passing the virus to your baby
- Do not share equipment for drug snorting, smoking or injection, such as straws, pipes, spoons, cookers and needles
- Use a condom during sexual activity
- Do not donate your blood, semen, body organs or tissues
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, dental floss, nail files or other personal care items or medical devices that could have tiny amounts of blood on them
- Keep all open cuts and sores bandaged until healed
- Properly sterilize any equipment that comes in contact with your body fluids, such as those used for tattooing or piercing
- Use a bleach solution to clean areas of your home or personal items that could have blood on them. Mix 9 parts water to one part bleach

For more information

- HealthLinkBC File #25b Hepatitis B Immune Globulin
- HealthLinkBC File #25c Hepatitis B Infant Vaccine
- HealthLinkBC File #25d Protecting Your Baby against Hepatitis B at Birth
- HealthLinkBC File #40d Living Well with Hepatitis B Virus Infection
- HealthLinkBC File #97 Contact with Blood or Body Fluids: Protecting against Infection

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