

Hepatitis B - Facts

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a viral infection that can affect the liver. Hepatitis B is not very common in the UK, with less than 2 in every 100 of individuals attending for screening testing positive in the first quarter of 2012. Hepatitis B is more common in the developing world.

How is Hepatitis B passed on?

Hepatitis B can be passed on through having intimate sexual contact, usually during oral, vaginal or anal sex with someone who has the Hepatitis B virus. The virus can also be passed on through sharing needles (IV drug users, acupuncture, tattooing, body piercing), when exposed to contaminated blood products and from mother to baby. In the UK, all blood and blood products are screened for Hepatitis B.

Many people contract Hepatitis B while on holiday - especially in countries where it is very prevalent or when having unprotected sex, experimenting with drugs or following an accident requiring medical treatment.

What are the symptoms?

Between 1 and 5 in every 10 individuals will have no symptoms at all and this is more common when someone is also infected with HIV or immunosuppressed. Symptoms usually develop between 6 weeks and 6 months after infection.

Early on, mild flu-like symptoms (e.g. joint aches, rashes, malaise, poor appetite, nausea) may occur.

Hepatitis B - Facts

More significant symptoms of liver involvement develop later (icteric phase) including yellowing of the skin, mucous membranes, and whites of the eyes (jaundice [hyperlink]), light-coloured stools and dark urine, abdominal pain and diarrhoea.

One in 20 cases progress to chronic infection after 6 months in which there may be no symptoms, but the person remains infectious. A small percentage of chronic carriers may develop irreversible liver damage or cancer of the liver.

How is Hepatitis B diagnosed?

Hepatitis B is diagnosed from a blood sample. The best time to test is at least 4 weeks after possibly being exposed to Hepatitis B through unprotected sex or sharing drug injection needles . This test is available at all Nuffield Health Wellbeing Centres.

How is Hepatitis B treated?

In most cases, Hepatitis B is temporary and may not require any specific treatment other than rest, painkillers and plenty of fluids. It is important for monitoring to take place to identify if a chronic infection develops. Individuals with chronic infection may require treatment with Interferon (immune booster) or antiviral drugs to reduce the likelihood of developing severe liver damage. Chronic infection monitoring and treatment is done through a Consultant in liver and gastroenterological diseases.

It is important to avoid unprotected sexual activity with your partner until both of you are non-infectious.

Hepatitis B prevention

Hepatitis B - Facts

You can protect yourself from Hepatitis B by wearing condoms, not sharing needles and razors and avoiding contact with contaminated needles (acupuncture, tattooing, body piercing).

Hepatitis B vaccination is recommended for all individuals at increased risk of exposure to hepatitis B including:

- Drug users
- Men who have sex with men
- Close family and friends of infected people
- People who change sexual partners frequently
- Patients who receive regular blood transfusions or blood products
- People travelling to high-risk countries
- Sex workers
- People with liver disease
- People with chronic kidney disease
- Babies born to infected mothers
- Medical personnel
- Prisoners
- Families adopting children from high-risk countries

Hepatitis B vaccination is available through your GP or Sexual Health (Genitourinary Medicine GUM) clinic and all Nuffield Health Travel Centres.

If you would like to book a Hepatitis B test or consultation simply call our dedicated client services team on 0333 920 1607 or email sexualhealth@nuffieldhealth.com