What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious liver disease caused by a virus which is called hepatitis B virus (HBV).

How common is hepatitis B?

One out of 20 people in the United States have been infected with HBV some time during their lives. In 2004, an estimated 60,000 people were infected with HBV. People of all ages get hepatitis B and about 5,000 die each year from sickness caused by HBV.

How do people get hepatitis B?

HBV is spread by having sex with an infected person. You are at risk of HBV infection by sexual contact if you:

- are a sex partner of someone who is infected with HBV
- are sexually-active and are not in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship (e.g., you have had more than one sex partner in the previous 6 months)
- have other STDs
- are a man having sex with a man

HBV is spread by exposure to infected blood from skin puncture or contact with mucous membranes. You are at risk of HBV infection from these exposures if you:

- live in the same house with someone who is infected with HBV and share personal items such as toothbrushes, razors, etc…
- shoot drugs
- have a job that involves contact with human blood or body fluids
- have end stage kidney disease

HBV is spread from an infected mother to her infant during birth.

HBV is not spread through food or water, sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, coughing, sneezing, or casual contact.

What are the signs and symptoms of hepatitis B?

Sometimes a person with HBV infection has no symptoms at all. Older people are more likely to have symptoms. You might be infected with HBV (and be spreading the virus) and not know it.

If you have symptoms, they might include yellow skin or yellowing of the whites of your eyes (jaundice); tiredness; loss of appetite; nausea; abdominal discomfort; dark urine; grey-colored bowel movements; or joint pain.

What are the complications of hepatitis B?

Some people who become infected with HBV develop chronic (lifelong) infection.

Chronic infection increases the risk for cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and liver failure. About 15%-25% of people with chronic HBV infection might die prematurely from liver cirrhosis or liver cancer.

How does hepatitis B affect a pregnant woman and her baby?

HBV can be spread from an infected mother to her infant during birth. To prevent spread of HBV from infected mothers to their infants, every woman should have her blood tested for hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) during each pregnancy.

Infants born to infected mothers need to get hepatitis B vaccine and another shot call HBIG (hepatitis B immune globulin) soon after birth to prevent infection.

How is hepatitis B diagnosed?

A blood test is the only way to diagnose hepatitis B.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There are no medications available for recently acquired (acute) HBV infection. There are antiviral drugs available for the treatment of chronic HBV infection.

Hepatitis B prevention information on back →

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

Hepatitis B vaccine is the best prevention against hepatitis B. Hepatitis B vaccine is recommended for all infants, for children and adolescents who were not vaccinated as infants, and for all unvaccinated adults who are at risk for HBV infection as well as any adult who wants to be protected against HBV infection.

The surest way to avoid transmission of all sexually transmitted diseases is to abstain from sexual intercourse, or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and is known to be uninfected.

Latex condoms, when used consistently and correctly, may reduce the risk of HBV transmission.

Never inject illegal drugs. If you are currently using, stop or get into a treatment program; if you can't stop, never share needles, syringes, water, or "works."

Where can I get more information?

Division of STD Prevention, CDC:
www.cdc.gov/std
Viral Hepatitis STD Topic:
www.cdc.gov/std/hepatitis/
Viral Hepatitis (all types) Topic:
http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/
Order Publications Online at www.cdc.gov/std/pubs/

STD information and referrals to STD Clinics
CDC-INFO
1-800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)
TTY: 1-888-232-6348
In English, en Español

CDC National Prevention Information Network (NPIN)
P.O. Box 6003
Rockville, MD 20849-6003
1-800-458-5231
1-888-282-7681 Fax
1-800-243-7012 TTY
E-mail: info@cdcnpin.org
www.cdcnpin.org

American Social Health Association (ASHA)
P. O. Box 13827
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-3827
1-800-783-9877
www.ashastd.org

Printable versions of this and other STD fact sheets are available at:
http://www.cdc.gov/std/healthcomm/fact_sheets.htm

Fact Sheet