The Facts about Hepatitis B

WHAT IS HEPATITIS B?
Hepatitis B is a potentially serious liver infection caused by the hepatitis B virus. Hepatitis B can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks (acute) with few or no symptoms, to a serious lifelong illness (chronic). In some cases, chronic hepatitis B can lead to scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), liver cancer, liver failure and death.

In 2012 it was estimated that 207,000 people were living with chronic hepatitis B infection in Australia.

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B, it’s generally supportive. Antiviral therapy is available for chronic hepatitis B but it does not get rid of the virus, its aim is to reduce the risk of developing serious liver complications.

Hepatitis B is 50 –100 times more infectious than HIV. Travelling to countries where hepatitis B is common could put you at risk of infection.

Vaccination is the best way to prevent hepatitis B.

HOW IS HEPATITIS B SPREAD?
Hepatitis B virus is spread through contact with blood or other body fluids of an infected person.

Many people who are infected with hepatitis B display no symptoms and are unaware that they have the disease. These people can still spread the virus to others unknowingly.

Hepatitis B can be spread via:

- Unprotected sexual contact
- Exposure to infected blood or bodily fluid
  - Medical procedures (planned or unplanned)
  - Dental work
- Sharing of unsterile equipment which penetrates the skin such as:
  - Needles (drug use)
  - Tattoo equipment
  - Acupuncture
  - Body piercing
- Sharing of grooming items where bodily fluids might be exchanged:
  - Razors
- Childbirth – a child can be infected when the pregnant mother carries the virus.
- Non sexual contact via open sores or wounds

Hepatitis B virus cannot be spread by contaminated food or water. The virus can survive outside the body for up to 7 days, therefore it can still be transmitted through contaminated surfaces.

The time from infection to when a person displays symptoms can range from 45 – 180 days.

Please see your doctor for more information on hepatitis B or if you think you have been exposed to the virus.

SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS B
Many people who are infected with hepatitis B display no symptoms and are unaware that they have the disease.

Symptoms of acute hepatitis B infection can include fever, a general feeling of unwell (malaise), tiredness, anorexia, nausea and vomiting, joint/muscle pain, yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice), dark urine, grey-coloured stools and abdominal pain.

Please see your doctor immediately if you think you are displaying the symptoms of hepatitis B infection.
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WHO IS AT RISK?

Your doctor may have recommended hepatitis B vaccination for you because you are travelling to an area where hepatitis B is common.

Some other at risk groups include: migrants from countries where hepatitis B is common, sexual and household contacts with persons who have hepatitis B, persons at occupational risks and those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent.

Speak to your doctor about whether you would be considered at risk due to underlying conditions or other reasons.

VACCINATION

Vaccination is recommended for all persons travelling to regions where there is a higher risk of hepatitis B or who are likely to undertake activities that increase their risks of exposure during travel.

Hepatitis B vaccination is recommended and provided free to children as part of the National Immunisation Program (NIP) in Australia. Hepatitis B vaccination for babies usually involves 4 injections, one at birth followed by another 3 doses at 2, 4 and 6 months.

Vaccination for adults is usually given as a series of three doses. It is important to complete the course of vaccination to receive full protection.

TRAVEL SAFETY

Hepatitis B is a major global health issue. More than 2 billion people around the world have been infected with hepatitis B at some time in their lives and about 600,000 people die every year due to the virus.

It is recommended that all non immune persons travelling to countries or areas with moderate to high risk of hepatitis B be vaccinated; particularly those who are likely to undertake activities that increase their risks of exposure during travel.

The risk of infection varies in different parts of the world. Areas of risk include countries in East and Southeast Asia, Pacific Islands, Eastern Europe, South and Central America, Africa, and Sub Saharan Africa.

As soon as you begin planning your trip, speak to your doctor to see if hepatitis B vaccination is right for you.