



Living Well with Hepatitis B Virus Infection

How can I prevent the spread of Hepatitis B virus (HBV)?

The hepatitis B virus (HBV) is usually spread by exposure to blood or body fluids from an infected person.

There is a vaccine available to prevent HBV infection. The hepatitis B vaccine is provided free to babies as part of their routine childhood immunizations. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #25c Hepatitis B Infant Vaccine](#).

The vaccine is also provided free to students in grade 6 who have not received the vaccine previously, and to specific at-risk groups, such as those living with someone who has HBV. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #25a Hepatitis B Vaccine](#).

If you are infected with HBV, you can reduce the chance of spreading this virus to others by doing the following:

- Encourage your sex partner(s) and people you live with to get tested for HBV; if they are not infected, they should receive the HBV vaccine for protection.
- Practice safe sex. Use a condom every time you have sex, especially if you have more than one partner. This also helps to reduce the risk of other sexually transmitted infections. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #08o Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#).
- Talk to your health care provider if you are pregnant. There is a risk of passing the virus on to your baby. This risk can be greatly reduced by giving your baby hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) and the first dose of the HBV vaccine series at birth. Breastfeeding is safe for your baby.
- Never donate your blood, semen, body organs or tissues.
- Tell your health care provider if you have ever donated or received blood products or tissue transplants.

- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, dental floss, nail files, or other items that could have tiny amounts of blood on them.
- Use a bleach solution to clean areas that could have blood on them. Mix 9 parts water to 1 part bleach. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #97 Contact with Blood or Body Fluids: Protecting Against Infection](#).
- Do not share drug snorting, smoking or injection equipment such as straws, pipes, cookers, filters, water, needles and syringes.
- Keep all open cuts and sores bandaged until healed.
- Put articles stained with your blood in a separate plastic bag before disposing them into household garbage – for example, bandages, tissues, tampons, razors, or dental floss.
- Tell your health care provider, dentist and anyone else who might come in contact with your blood, such as those who do tattoos, body-piercing, electrolysis, or acupuncture, that you are infected with HBV. This will allow them to take precautions to help prevent spreading HBV to themselves and others.
- Advise anyone who has been exposed to your blood or body fluids that you have hepatitis B. Depending upon the type of exposure and their immunization history they may need to have blood tests and be immunized with hepatitis B vaccine and/or hepatitis B immune globulin. Immunization can reduce the risk of HBV infection if the person is susceptible. If the exposure involves sexual contact or contact with a person's broken skin or mucous membranes of the eyes, mouth or nose they should visit a health care provider as soon as possible and preferably within 48 hours.

How is Hepatitis B virus not spread?

HBV is not spread by:

- Casual contact, such as in an office setting.
- Coughing or sneezing.
- Physical contact such as hugging and kissing.

- Using the same dishes or cutlery.
- Breastfeeding.
- Swimming in a chlorinated pool when you have cuts or scrapes or when you are menstruating.
- Being bitten or stung by an insect which then bites or stings someone else.
- The healthy skin of others coming into contact with your body fluids such as saliva, urine, feces or vomit.

How does Hepatitis B virus affect people?

People may or may not develop symptoms once they become infected with HBV. Adults and children 5 years of age and over are likely to have symptoms which may include tiredness, fever, loss of appetite, and jaundice or yellowing of the skin. Most children under 5 years of age and adults with weakened immune systems do not have any symptoms.

Most adults will clear the virus and recover completely. About 1 in 20 adults infected with HBV will develop chronic HBV infection. Young children are less likely to clear the virus, and about 9 out of 10 infants will become chronically infected with HBV. This long-term infection may lead to scarring of the liver, called cirrhosis. Cirrhosis can lead to liver failure and/or cancer in a small number of people. You should talk to your health care provider about being screened for liver cancer if you have chronic HBV infection.

Is there treatment for Hepatitis B?

Effective treatment is now available to help prevent liver damage. Not all people with HBV need treatment. You should see your health care provider regularly and be assessed to determine how your liver is functioning. The decision to treat HBV is based on many factors.

What can I do to stay as healthy as possible?

- Get more information about HBV from your health care provider, local health unit, support groups, or the Canadian Liver Foundation at www.liver.ca.
- See your health care provider regularly or about twice a year.
- Check with your health care provider before taking any new medicines or vitamins, including over the counter and herbal medicines.
- Get tested for HIV and hepatitis C virus.
- Get the hepatitis A vaccine if you are not already immune. The vaccine is free for people infected with hepatitis B. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #33 Hepatitis A Vaccine](#).
- Get the pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine and then get a booster dose of the vaccine 5 years later. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #62b Pneumococcal Polysaccharide Vaccine](#).
- Get the influenza vaccine every year. The vaccine is free for people infected with hepatitis B and is usually available in October. For your best protection you should get the vaccine as soon as it is available. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #12d Inactivated Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#).
- Eat healthy, nutritious food as outlined by the Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide. See www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/index-eng.php for more information.
- Get regular exercise.
- Avoid alcohol as it increases the liver damage caused by HBV.
- Avoid smoking and illegal drugs. For information about quitting smoking, please see [HealthLinkBC File #30c Quitting Smoking](#). For information about managing substance use, visit HeretoHelp at www.heretohelp.bc.ca or call 310-6789 for free, 24 hour support.
- It is important to manage the HBV infection and take good care of your health. HBV should not be a barrier to employment.

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles or your local public health unit.

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