



Hepatitis B
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An Introduction

About this leaflet

This leaflet provides you with an overview of hepatitis B. It outlines what the virus is, how it can be transmitted, ways of reducing the risk of becoming infected, and how to stay as healthy as possible after being diagnosed. If you have concerns about hepatitis B you should seek advice from a qualified health professional.

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a blood borne viral infection that attacks the liver, which is one of the largest organs in the body. It can (in some cases) cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis of the liver, primary liver cancer and liver failure. Estimates suggest that in the UK the prevalence of chronic (infected more than six months) hepatitis B is 0.3% (180,000 people).

Hepatitis simply means 'inflamed liver'. The liver has more than 500 functions, including helping to process food and toxins. If someone has hepatitis B the liver may not be able to perform those functions properly.

The virus can be transmitted in a variety of ways, but in the UK the most common route of transmission is via unprotected sex (vaginal, anal or oral) and sharing of equipment used during injecting drug use.

Other routes of infection include:

- Mother to baby during pregnancy, delivery and breast feeding (This is the main route world wide)
- 'Possible' sharing straws for snorting drugs
- Tattooing or piercing using unclean equipment
- Accidental injury - e.g. needlestick injury, as well as blood transfusion in countries with poor screening

What are the symptoms?

Many people with hepatitis B have no symptoms, whilst others experience a flu-like illness. Others may have a mild illness and are not ill enough to see a doctor. A few people develop a serious illness and need to be looked after in hospital.

Symptoms at either the early (acute) or late (chronic) stage can include:

- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Itching
- Abdominal pain
- Tiredness (like constant 'flu')
- Joint pain
- Jaundice
- Dark urine

What does Hepatitis B do?

Some people will recover from hepatitis B in the 'acute' stage, usually within weeks or a few months, although they may feel tired and not have much energy for many months. Some people may recover without ever realising they have been infected. Others, about 1 in 10 people exposed, will develop chronic infection which could lead to serious liver damage.

Liver inflammation is fairly common for people who have had hepatitis B infections for a number of years. It is important to be in regular contact with a consultant, who will be able to assess liver damage by undertaking a liver biopsy (in some cases) and carrying out regular blood tests. Ideally, you should be linked in with either a Hepatologist or a Gastroenterologist.

Chronic infection can lead to permanent scarring, which is known as Fibrosis. If the whole liver becomes fibrosed, then this is known as 'Cirrhosis of the liver'. This can take years to develop and will not affect everyone with chronic hepatitis B. If you develop cirrhosis, you risk developing liver failure or in some cases primary liver cancer ("hepatocellular carcinoma").

For most people with hepatitis B, treatment will not be necessary. If treatment is recommended there are several drugs licensed to treat hepatitis B at the present time. All treatment options will need to be discussed with your consultant should the need arise.

Preventing Hepatitis B

A vaccine to prevent infection from hepatitis B has been available since 1982 and is probably the most effective way of protecting yourself from becoming infected with the virus. It consists of three injections over a period of time; you must receive the complete course of injections to ensure the vaccine has the best chance of providing you with the immunity to hepatitis B. It is available from your GP (where there may be a charge for it), GUM clinics (for certain groups i.e. men who have sex with men) and in some cases if you have a drugs worker they may be able to arrange it.

Hepatitis D is another blood borne virus which is transmitted in the same way as hepatitis B, but is rare in the UK. This virus needs to have hepatitis B to survive, which means it is only possible to have hepatitis D if you have hepatitis B. So by having the immunity for hepatitis B you will also be protected against hepatitis D.

Because hepatitis B is mainly passed through blood, there are things you can do to avoid becoming infected or transmitting the virus.

For people who inject/use drugs these include:

- Avoid sharing needles, syringes, filters, swabs, spoons, water, tourniquets and all other paraphernalia
- Access needle exchanges
- Do not share straws if you snort drugs (as blood could be present from damaged nasal membranes)

Sexual transmission:

- Practice safer sex by using condoms for vaginal or anal intercourse and for oral sex
- Use a latex barrier (dental dam) for other sexual activities i.e. rimming

Pregnant women:

- Since April 2000, all pregnant women in the UK are tested for hepatitis B. If they are infected, the baby is vaccinated and given injections of antibodies called immunoglobulin immediately after birth

The risk of passing hepatitis B in any other way is believed to be low. However activities to be cautious about, include:

- Tattooing and piercing - always go to a reputable tattooist / piercer and never share needles if doing it yourself
- It is not advisable to share razors, toothbrushes and other personal items
- Cuts and wounds - keep clean and cover with a waterproof dressing or plaster

Staying Healthy with Hepatitis B

It is possible to remain well for a long time even if a lot of your liver is affected. If you look after your liver it may cope better. You may stay well for longer and symptoms may improve.

You can help yourself stay well and improve your chance of reducing your symptoms by:

- Stopping drinking alcohol completely or reviewing your intake, reducing it to within the safe limits advised by your doctor. Consuming alcohol can be damaging for your liver with or without hepatitis B
- Following a healthy diet; this includes plenty of fruit and vegetables and avoiding excessive fatty and sugary meals. This is dependent on your income and ability to eat well – speak to your doctor or a dietician if you are referred

Getting a diagnosis

Hepatitis B can be diagnosed in a number of settings, such as sexual health clinic or GUM clinics, GP surgery, antenatal care; the test will involve you giving a blood sample. A confirmed positive test result should then lead to a referral to a Hepatologist or Gastroenterologist who will then assess your medical needs (in most areas).

Further information and support around HIV and Viral Hepatitis is available from:

The Eddystone Trust (Plymouth)

36 Looe Street
Bretonside
Plymouth
PL4 0EB
Tel: 01752 257077

The Eddystone Trust (Torbay)

24 Braddons Hill Road West
Torquay
TQ1 1BG
Tel: 01803 380692

Useful Websites:

The Eddystone Trust

www.eddystone.org.uk
+ve
www.plusve.org

The British Liver Trust

www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

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