

Hepatitis B Virus (HBV)

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B virus (HBV) is a virus that can cause either a short-lived illness or can cause long-term infection.

After being infected with HBV some people will remain infectious in the long term. This is known as a chronic infection. The risk of developing chronic infection is high (up to 90%) in young children but is lower (1%-10%) in older children and adults.

People who have the long-term infection (chronic infection) may suffer episodes of liver inflammation (hepatitis) which can lead to severe scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) which in turn can contribute to liver failure or cancer of the liver. They may also require a liver transplant.

What are the symptoms?

Some people, especially children under one year old, do not have any symptoms. Other people experience symptoms such as:

- mild flu-like illness;
- loss of appetite;
- stomach pain;
- nausea and vomiting;
- dark urine; and
- yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice).

The time from contact with HBV until displaying symptoms of the disease is 45-180 days with an average of 60-90 days.

How is it spread?

The HBV can be found in blood and body fluids.

The virus is most commonly transmitted through:

- sexual contact;
- sharing needles, syringes and other equipment used to inject drugs;
- an infected woman passing the virus to her child during birth;
- the sharing of tooth brushes, razors, nail files or other personal items that may lead to the exchange of bodily secretions such as blood and saliva; and
- any form of injury with something sharp that is contaminated with blood.

How is it diagnosed?

HBV is detected by a blood test. This can show if a person has current infection or has had HBV in the past but has cleared the infection. It can also show whether someone is immune following immunisation.

How is it treated?

People with chronic HBV infection should be closely monitored by their GP with regular blood tests to check their liver is working correctly. If there is evidence of liver damage that person should be referred to a hepatitis specialist for consideration of antiviral treatment.

How is it prevented?

The best way to protect yourself from HBV is to have a course of vaccine. A very safe, low cost and effective vaccine exists to protect against HBV. Immunisation is given by doctors and some councils immunisation clinics.

Who should get immunised?

Vaccines are provided free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) to:

- infants at birth then at two, four and six months of age (can be given as early as six weeks);
- people aged less than 20 years who missed any of their childhood hepatitis B vaccines;
- refugees and humanitarian entrants 20 years or older.

A Tasmanian Government funded targeted community-focused hepatitis B immunisation program exists to provide free vaccine for population groups that are most at risk of acute hepatitis infection.

Who can receive the funded hepatitis B vaccine?

In Tasmania funded hepatitis B vaccine is available for people who are at increased risk of acquiring HBV and includes:

- household contacts of people with HBV;
- sexual contacts of people with HBV;
- men who have sex with men;
- sex workers;
- people who have HIV infection;
- people who have hepatitis C infection;
- people who inject drugs;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people;
- inmates of correctional facilities; and
- migrants from high endemic HBV regions (see below).

Which countries have high endemic HBV?

Tasmanians from the following regions, with higher than average endemic HBV, are eligible for free vaccine:

- Sub-Saharan Africa;
- The Amazon Basin;
- Pacific Island countries;
- Parts of Central Asia and the Middle East; and
- East and South East Asia (excluding Japan).

These regions reflect a combination of patterns of movement to Tasmania and the World Health Organisation classification of high endemic HBV.

People from high endemic HBV regions should undergo a blood test (serological testing) for carriage and prior infection/immunity before receiving vaccine.

What should I do if I have had contact with someone who has HBV?

If you think you may have had an exposure to HBV, you should make an appointment to see your doctor as soon as possible. If you are at risk, your doctor will prescribe possible preventative treatment.

What should I do if I have HBV?

Your doctor will inform you if you have the virus. They will provide advice according to your blood results. It is important to prevent spreading it to others by not sharing personal grooming products, do not have unprotected sexual contact and do not share drug injecting equipment.

For further information please refer to: Hepatitis Australia www.hepatitisaustralia.com Red Thread www.redthread.org.au/ Call the Public Health Hotline – Tasmania on **1800 671 738** to speak to a Clinical Nurse Consultant.

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