

Hepatitis B



WHAT IS HEPATITIS?

Hepatitis (literally 'inflamed liver') has many different causes, including infection by a virus, exposure to chemicals, taking certain drugs or drinking too much alcohol. Viral infection is the most common cause of chronic hepatitis. **Hepatitis B** is a virus carried in the blood that can cause damage to your liver.

WHAT DOES MY LIVER DO?

Your liver is one of the largest and most important organs in your body. It is responsible for:

- storing vitamins, minerals, irons and sugars
- breaking down food
- making essential proteins
- breaking down harmful chemicals.

HOW CAN HEPATITIS B AFFECT MY LIVER?

If you have contracted hepatitis B, the virus initially passes from your blood to your liver, where it infects the liver cells. The virus multiplies inside the liver cells (a process called replication) and goes on to infect other liver cells.

Your body's immune system recognises the infected cells and attacks them. This causes your liver to become inflamed and can ultimately lead to liver damage. Damage due to the hepatitis B virus can build up slowly over many years, so it is important to detect it early. If left untreated over a long period of time, the hepatitis B virus can cause severe scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), liver failure and liver cancer.

HOW DID I GET INFECTED?

You may not know how you got infected and you are not alone. In parts of the world where hepatitis B is common, people are most likely to contract the virus from their mothers at or soon after birth or at a young age from their brothers or sisters.

People living in parts of the world where hepatitis B is rare, such as in Europe, are most likely to become infected as adults, possibly through unprotected sex with someone who has the virus or through blood-to-blood contact.



WILL I BE INFECTED FOR LIFE?

Not everyone who is exposed to the hepatitis B virus will be infected for life. Some people are able to 'clear the virus' during the first 6 months of infection (known as 'acute' hepatitis B infection) before it becomes chronic. The chance of clearing the virus varies with age: over 90% of adults with strong, healthy immune systems will recover from an acute infection. However, people infected as newborns or infants are unlikely to clear the virus during the acute phase because their immune systems are not fully developed. These people will go on to develop chronic hepatitis B and will be infected for the rest of their lives.

WHAT SYMPTOMS CAN I EXPECT?

You may not notice any symptoms when you are first infected with hepatitis B. Symptoms are often experienced some time after infection – up to 6 weeks later in some people. The symptoms are generally mild, and may come and go. Some people have described the symptoms as similar to having flu.

If you have been infected with hepatitis B, you may experience one or more of the following symptoms:

- feeling tired (fatigue)
- loss of appetite
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea
- headaches and fever
- joint pain or muscle aches
- unexplained weight loss
- jaundice (when the skin and whites of the eyes turn yellow; also associated with dark urine)
- tenderness in the abdomen or abdominal pain
- itching all over the body.

People with cirrhosis may also experience fluid retention and abdominal swelling. Although cirrhosis cannot be cured, successfully treating hepatitis B will stop the liver damage from getting any worse and may even reverse it.

WHAT CAN MY DOCTOR DO ABOUT MY HEPATITIS B?

If you have recently contracted hepatitis B, your doctor will monitor you to see whether you are able to clear the virus. Six months after you have contracted the virus, your doctor will give you a blood test to check whether you are still infected. If you are, your doctor may want you to have a liver ultrasound to evaluate the health of your liver.

Whether or not you need treatment for your hepatitis B depends on how active the virus is and what effect it is having on your liver. Many people are able to clear the virus before it becomes established, so your doctor is most likely to suggest rest and treating any symptoms you may experience.

If you are diagnosed with chronic hepatitis B, your doctor will be able to help you decide whether to start treatment, when to start treatment and what medication would be most appropriate for you.

WHAT TREATMENT IS AVAILABLE?

If you have chronic hepatitis B, your doctor may suggest treatment with interferon. Interferon is a natural protein produced by the body to fight infections caused by viruses. However, if you have chronic hepatitis B, your body is unable to produce enough interferon to destroy the virus. The drug form of interferon may then be needed to boost the body's natural defences. Since interferon is a protein, it would be destroyed if taken by mouth so it can only be given by injection under the skin. Alternatively, your doctor may prescribe antiviral tablets.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN CHRONIC HEPATITIS B TREATMENT?

Deciding on treatment

If you have chronic hepatitis B, your doctor will help you decide when to start treatment and what medication would be most appropriate for you. If you are prescribed interferon, you will need to take your medication for up to 12 months. It is very important to complete the full course of interferon treatment to make sure you get the most benefit from your medication.

Tests before treatment starts

Your doctor may need to do some tests to decide which treatment would be most appropriate for you (in most cases, these will be blood tests). A small tissue sample (biopsy) of your liver may also be taken – this can reveal how your liver has been affected by the hepatitis B virus.

Hepatitis B



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Checkups during treatment

If you decide to start treatment, regular visits will be scheduled with your doctor or nurse to check on your progress and to monitor and manage the effects of treatment.

HOW DOES TREATMENT HELP?

Since there is no 'cure' for chronic hepatitis B, the main reasons for treating the virus are to:

- put the disease into remission (stop the liver damage from getting any worse)
- keep the disease under control (stop infected cells from multiplying).

WHEN IS TREATMENT NOT APPROPRIATE?

You and your doctor may decide that, because of personal or social reasons that may make it hard for you to complete your full course of treatment (e.g. major life events such as moving house, changing job or caring for a relative), it might be better not to treat you at the present time. Interferon can also cause birth defects, so must not be taken if you are pregnant or planning pregnancy.

If treatment is not appropriate, you should try to minimise further damage to your liver by improving your overall health and avoiding cigarettes and alcohol.



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CAN I INFECT OTHERS?

You can't pass on the virus by sneezing, coughing, kissing, sharing cutlery or dishes, using bathrooms or toilets, so you can continue with most of your daily activities as usual. The main ways in which the hepatitis B virus could be passed to someone else is through blood-to-blood contact or having unprotected sex. There is a highly effective vaccine for hepatitis B, which can prevent the spread of infection. Your friends and family should speak to their doctor to find out if vaccination would be appropriate for them.

Here are some simple steps you can take so you don't infect other people:

1. Don't share needles or use unsterilised equipment (e.g. for tattoos, ear/body piercing or acupuncture).
2. Avoid sharing personal toiletry items (e.g. toothbrushes, razors or nail clippers) as these may have traces of dried blood on them.
3. Advise anyone who could come into contact with your blood – such as your doctor or dentist, or possibly people you work with – that you are infected with the hepatitis B virus.
4. Avoid high-risk sexual activities that cause bleeding and avoid sex during menstruation. Even oral sex can transmit the virus, but condoms can lower the risk of infection (if your partner has been vaccinated, there is no need for additional protection).
5. Clean up blood spills (wear rubber gloves and use a disinfectant such as undiluted bleach).

