What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is the most common serious liver infection in the world. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV), which attacks liver cells and can lead to cirrhosis (scarring), liver failure, or liver cancer. Most healthy people who are infected as adults are able to fight off the infection and clear the virus from their blood. This may take up to 6 months, and they are infectious during this time. Unfortunately, infants and young children are at the greatest risk of developing chronic (lifelong) infection if they are exposed to HBV. These people need further evaluation by a liver specialist or doctor knowledgeable about hepatitis B.

Am I at risk for a hepatitis B infection?

Health care workers who come into contact with human blood, blood products, or potentially infectious bodily fluids are at an increased risk for exposure to the hepatitis B virus.

How can I protect myself as a health care worker?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all health care workers, emergency personnel, and other individuals who are exposed to blood or bodily fluids on the job should be vaccinated against hepatitis B. The vaccine is given in 3 doses over a 6 month period (0, 1, and 6 months). It is recommended that health care workers have their hepatitis B surface antibody (HBsAb) level tested 4-6 weeks after completion of the series to make sure that they have built up protection against HBV. Once a blood test shows that a health care worker is protected, the CDC does not recommend routine antibody testing or vaccine boosters. However, each health care institution may have its own hepatitis B vaccine protocol. If a person does not develop the protective antibodies after completion of the vaccine series, then the entire series should be repeated (with antibody testing 4-6 weeks after completion of the additional second series).

What if I am exposed to the virus?

For unvaccinated individuals who think they have been exposed to hepatitis B, it is recommended that they speak to their doctor about “post-exposure prophylaxis” as soon as possible. If the source of the exposure is known to be positive for hepatitis B, then the exposed person should receive the first dose of the vaccine and one dose of Hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) as soon as possible (within 24 hours if possible). After that, the remaining 2 doses of the vaccine can be given 1 and 6 months after the first dose. About 1-2 months after the vaccine series is completed, it is a good idea to get tested to determine whether the person developed protective antibodies. If the hepatitis B status of the source is unknown and the exposed person is unvaccinated, it is recommended that they begin the hepatitis B vaccine series as soon as possible.
The Hepatitis B Foundation is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to finding a cure and improving the quality of life for those affected by hepatitis B worldwide.

For additional information, please visit the following resources:

- **Vaccination Procedures:**
  - "Immunization of Health Care Workers," MMWR, 1997, volume 46, No. RR-18
    [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00050577.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00050577.htm)
  - "Guidelines for infection control in health care personnel," CDC, 1998
  - "Immunization and Health Care Workers," Immunization Action Coalition (IAC)
    [www.immunize.org/hcw/index.htm](http://www.immunize.org/hcw/index.htm)

- **Exposure Procedures:**
    [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5011a1.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5011a1.htm)
  - HBV-Infected Health Care Workers – “Recommendations for Preventing Transmission of Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Hepatitis B Virus to Patients During Exposure-Prone Invasive Procedures,” MMWR, July 12, 1991, volume 40(RR08);1-9
    [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00014845.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00014845.htm)