

## GENERAL INFORMATION

### **What is hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B is the world's most common liver infection that can lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV), which attacks and injures the liver. It is transmitted through blood, unprotected sex, shared or re-used needles, and from an infected mother to her newborn baby during delivery. Most infected adults are able to get rid of the hepatitis B virus without any problems. However, most infected babies and children are unable to get rid of the virus and develop chronic infections.

The good news is that there is a simple test for hepatitis B, a safe vaccine to prevent hepatitis B infections, and new drugs that could benefit chronic carriers of HBV who have active signs of liver disease.

### **How many people are affected?**

Worldwide, 2 billion people (1 out of 3 people) have been infected with HBV and 400 million people have become "chronic carriers" of the virus. This is a huge number in comparison to 47 million people with HIV/AIDS and 170 million people with chronic hepatitis C in the world.

### **Where is hepatitis B most commonly found in the world?**

Hepatitis B is most common in Asia, Southeast Asia, India, parts of Africa and South America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. However, even in the United States, 1 out of 20 Americans have been infected with hepatitis B and an estimated 1.25 million have chronic hepatitis B infections.

### **Why should Koreans be concerned about hepatitis B?**

Although hepatitis B can infect anyone, Asians have the highest rate of hepatitis B infection of all ethnic groups. According to the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University, two-thirds of all 400 million chronic carriers of HBV in the world live in Asia. This means that there are 260 million chronic carriers living in Asia. In many Asian countries, including Korea, approximately 10% of the population is chronically infected with hepatitis B. In the United States, more than half of the 1.25 million chronic carriers of HBV are of Asian descent.

### **Why should Korean-Americans be concerned about hepatitis B?**

Although hepatitis B is very common in Korea, it is also a problem among Korean-Americans living in the United States. The virus is spread most commonly among Asians from an infected mother who unknowingly passes it to her newborn baby during delivery and in early childhood through blood contact with another child or adult who has a chronic infection. Most Asians who are chronically infected do not know they are infected. As a result, several generations in a family can be affected by hepatitis B, which can lead to liver cancer later in life.

It is very important for Asians to know that hepatitis B is not an "inherited" disease – it is an infectious disease that is caused by a virus. Korean families can break the cycle of infection by getting tested, vaccinated, and treated for chronic hepatitis B.

### **Why is hepatitis B so dangerous?**

Hepatitis B is dangerous because it is a “silent disease” that can infect people without them knowing it and can result in a chronic infection that leads to liver cancer without any symptoms until it is too late. Most people who have become chronically infected with hepatitis B are unaware of their infection. This means that the virus can quietly and continuously attack the liver over many years without being detected. Even in the early stages of liver cancer, a person may not experience any serious symptoms until the cancer is so far advanced that treatment is no longer helpful.

80% of all liver cancer in the world is caused by chronic hepatitis B, which makes this silent disease even more dangerous. Most people with chronic hepatitis B infections can feel quite healthy, so they do not seek early medical attention for testing or treatment. This means that they can also unknowingly continue to pass the virus on to others, which is why hepatitis B is such a large health threat to the Korean community.

### **How can I get hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B is an infectious disease caused by a virus that is spread through blood. It is not spread through casual contact. You cannot get hepatitis B from the air, hugging, touching, sneezing, coughing, toilet seats or doorknobs. The most common way hepatitis B is passed to others include the following routes of transmission:

- Direct contact with blood or infected bodily fluids
- Unprotected sex with an infected partner
- Shared or re-used needles (for example, sharing needles for illegal drugs or re-using needles that are not properly sterilized for acupuncture, tattoos, or ear/body piercing)
- From an infected mother to her newborn baby during delivery (this is the most common route of infection among Asians)

### **Who is most likely to become infected with hepatitis B?**

Although hepatitis B can infect any person of any age or race, there are some people who are at higher risk for becoming infected. Your job, your lifestyle choices, or living in a household with an infected person or family member can increase your chances of being exposed to the hepatitis B virus. Here are some of the "high risk" groups for acquiring hepatitis B infection, but please remember that this is not a complete list:

- People of Asian descent, especially those whose parents have emigrated to the U.S.A.
- Infants born to women who are infected with hepatitis B
- People who live in close household contact with someone who has hepatitis B. This includes babies, children and adults
- People who have unprotected sex or have multiple sexual partners
- Health care workers and other people who are exposed to blood in their jobs
- People who use illegal drugs
- People who undergo kidney dialysis or have hemophilia
- People who live in countries where hepatitis B is very common (Asia, Southeast Asia, India, parts of Africa and South America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East)
- People who travel to or from countries where hepatitis B is very common (see above)

### **Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B?**

Yes, there is a very safe and effective HBV vaccine. In fact, it is actually the first “anti-cancer vaccine” because it can protect you from hepatitis B, which is the cause of 80% of all liver cancer in the world. It only takes 3 shots to protect yourself and those you love against HBV for a lifetime. Make an appointment with your doctor to start the vaccine series today!

### **Who should be vaccinated?**

In the United States, doctors recommend that all newborns and children up to age 18 years be vaccinated. Adults, especially those of Asian descent, should also seriously consider being vaccinated. Babies, children and teens can receive free hepatitis B vaccine from state health departments. Adults can ask their doctor or a local health clinic for the hepatitis B vaccine.

### **Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?**

With more than one billion doses of HBV vaccine given throughout the world, medical and scientific studies have shown the hepatitis B vaccine to be one of the safest vaccines ever made. The vaccine is made in a laboratory – you cannot get hepatitis B from the vaccine. The most common side effects are redness and soreness in the arm where the shot is given. Talk to your doctor about possible allergic reactions or side effects before starting the vaccine series.

### **What else can I do to protect myself from hepatitis B?**

Since hepatitis B is spread through blood and infected bodily fluids, there are several simple things that you can do to protect yourself from possible infection:

- Avoid sharing sharp objects such as razors, toothbrushes, earrings, and nail clippers
- Make sure that sterile needles are used for acupuncture, tattoos, ear and body piercing
- Avoid touching blood or infected bodily fluids directly
- Wear gloves and use a fresh solution of bleach and water to clean up blood spills
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after touching or cleaning up blood
- Use condoms with sexual partners
- Avoid illegal drugs
- Most importantly, make sure you receive the hepatitis B vaccine!

### **Will I become sick if I’m infected with hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B is considered a "silent infection" because it often does not cause any symptoms. Most people feel healthy and do not know they have been infected, which means they can unknowingly pass the virus on to others. Other people may have mild symptoms such as fever, fatigue, joint or muscle pain, or loss of appetite that are mistaken for the flu. Less common but more serious symptoms include severe nausea and vomiting, yellow eyes and skin (this is called “jaundice”), and a swollen stomach; these symptoms require immediate medical attention and a person may need to be hospitalized.

### **Is there a blood test for hepatitis B?**

There is a simple hepatitis B blood test that your doctor or health clinic can order. All you need to do is go to the doctor’s office. Sometimes the doctor may ask to check your blood again six months after your first visit to confirm your test results. For more information, visit our [Blood Tests](#) page.

### **Will I recover from a hepatitis B infection?**

The answer depends on whether you are infected as an adult, a child, or a baby. Most infected adults will recover without any problems, but most infected babies and children will become chronic carriers of HBV.

Asians are most commonly infected as infants or in early childhood, which is why they have such a high risk of developing chronic hepatitis B infections. In comparison, non-Asian Americans are usually infected as adults, thus, are more likely to recover from an infection.

- **Adults** – 90% will get rid of the virus and recover without any problems; 10% will become chronic carriers of HBV; and in rare cases, a person may become very sick and die within a short amount of time from a hepatitis B infection.
- **Young Children** – 40% will get rid of the virus and recover without problems; 60% will become chronic carriers of HBV.
- **Infants** – 90% will definitely become chronic carriers of HBV; only 10% have a chance of getting rid of the virus.

Infants and children are at greatest risk from a hepatitis B infection, therefore, the United States has recommended that all babies and children up to age 18 years receive the hepatitis B vaccine. The Asian community must make sure that all babies and children are vaccinated against HBV. In addition, all adults should seriously consider being tested and vaccinated to help stop the dangerous spread of hepatitis B. Hepatitis B is one the largest health threats that face all Asian groups.

### **What does it mean to become chronically infected with hepatitis B?**

Babies, children and adults who are unable to get rid of the virus after six months are diagnosed as being a "chronic carrier" of the hepatitis B virus. This means that they are chronically infected with HBV. Although chronic carriers may not feel sick, the virus can stay in their blood and liver for a lifetime. As a result, they can pass the virus on to other people and they live with a much greater risk of developing cirrhosis and liver cancer later in life.

### **Where can I go to be tested and vaccinated?**

You can ask your family doctor, the local health department, or community health clinic to order the simple hepatitis B blood test. You can also start the vaccine series at this time.

If you need help finding a doctor or want more information, please call the HBV Information and Assistance HelpLine at **1-888-888-0981**. This is a free telephone call, which is part of a national community program sponsored by GlaxoSmithKline. All information is available in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Vietnamese.

### **Is there any treatment if I have chronic hepatitis B?**

Currently, there are several approved drugs in the United States for people who have chronic hepatitis B infections.

**Epivir-HBV** or **Zeffix** (lamivudine) is a pill that is taken orally

**Hepsera** (adefovir dipivoxil) is a pill that is taken orally

**Intron A** (interferon alpha) is a drug given by injection

It is important to know that not every chronic hepatitis B patient needs to be on medication. Some patients only need to be monitored by their doctor on a regular basis (at least once a year, or more). Other patients with active signs of liver disease may benefit the most from treatment. Be sure to talk to your doctor about whether you could benefit from treatment and discuss the treatment options. In addition, there are promising new drugs in clinical trials and in the research pipeline.

**It is vital that all people with chronic hepatitis B visit their doctor on a regular basis, whether they receive treatment or not!**

There are additional promising new drugs being tested and developed for chronic hepatitis B. Please visit the Hepatitis B Foundation's [Drug Watch](#) chart to find out more about new potential treatments. This chart is available only in English since the information changes so frequently.

**DISCLAIMER:**

**The information provided on this website is for your information and education only. The Hepatitis B Foundation is not a medical organization. We strongly encourage you talk to your doctor or a qualified health care provider for any personal medical care and advice.**