

## LIVING WITH CHRONIC HEPATITIS B

### **What does it mean if my doctor tells me that I'm a "chronic carrier" of hepatitis B?**

A person is diagnosed as a “chronic carrier” when blood tests show that they are unable to get rid of the hepatitis B virus after six months. They are still able to pass the virus on to others because it stays in their blood and liver for possibly a lifetime. Although many chronic carriers should expect to lead long healthy lives, they must be sure to see a doctor knowledgeable about hepatitis B (such as a “liver specialist”) for regular check-ups at least once a year, or more if needed, since they live with an increased risk of developing cirrhosis or liver cancer later in life. There are simple lifestyle changes a person can make to protect the health of their liver and new drug treatments that can benefit those who show signs of active liver disease.

If you are a pregnant woman with chronic HBV, you can also pass the virus on to your newborn baby, which is a very serious problem. Fortunately, there is something you can do to protect your newborn baby, so be sure to check [Pregnant Women and Hepatitis B](#) for more information.

### **If I don't feel sick, can I still be a "chronic carrier"?**

Many chronic carriers of hepatitis B feel healthy and strong despite having the virus stay in their bodies. They can be infected for a long time and not even know it. That is why hepatitis B is called a "silent infection" – many people have no symptoms. With a chronic infection, the virus continues to attack and injure your liver for a long period of time, even though you may feel just fine. By the time you feel sick enough to see a doctor, however, you could already have cirrhosis or liver cancer. So, make sure you are tested for hepatitis B sooner rather than later. Early detection can help protect those you love from a hepatitis B infection and decrease your risk of liver cancer through regular medical check-ups and possible drug treatment.

### **Should I get the vaccine if I am a chronic carrier?**

Unfortunately, the hepatitis B vaccine is too late for chronic carriers. It will not help since you already have hepatitis B. However, the vaccine can protect your loved ones. Make sure your partner and children are tested and vaccinated.

### **What serious liver diseases can result from chronic hepatitis B?**

Although chronic hepatitis B doesn't always lead to fatal liver disease, the risk is much greater than normal considering 1 out of 4 chronic carriers will suffer from cirrhosis or liver cancer later in life. These diseases can result due to liver damage that occurs over many years from the hepatitis B virus; these diseases can be life-threatening. With cirrhosis, scar tissue is created as the liver tries to repair itself after constant attacks by the hepatitis B virus. This scar tissue makes the liver hard, which can cause liver failure. A healthy liver is soft and flexible.

Liver cancer is a very large health threat to Asians and can often be fatal since symptoms may not appear until it's too late. Among Korean-Americans, liver cancer is the fourth leading type of cancer. Early detection of chronic hepatitis B can definitely improve the chances of preventing and surviving liver cancer through regular medical check-ups and new drug treatments.

Since 80% of all liver cancer in the world is caused by chronic HBV, it is vitally important that all Asians be tested for hepatitis B. Currently, there are 360,000 deaths each year from hepatitis B among Asians throughout the world. Early diagnosis and early treatment is essential in saving

lives! Both cirrhosis and liver cancer require expert medical attention. Treatment options for these serious liver diseases can include medications and sometimes even a liver transplant to help extend one's life.

### **Is there a cure for chronic hepatitis B?**

The good news is that there are promising new treatments for people living with chronic hepatitis B. Today, there are several approved drugs in the United States that can slow down liver damage caused by the virus.

The new drugs can help slow the progression of liver disease in chronically infected people by slowing down the virus. If there is less hepatitis B virus being produced, then there is less damage being done to the liver. Sometimes these drugs can even get rid of the virus. With all of the new exciting research, there is great hope that a complete cure will be found for chronic hepatitis B in the near future.

### **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.

### **Approved Hepatitis B Drugs in the United States**

Interferon-alpha (Intron A) is given by injection several times a week for six months to a year, or sometimes longer. The drug can cause side effects such as flu-like symptoms, depression, and headaches. Approved in 1991 and available for both children and adults.

Lamivudine (Epivir-HBV, Zeffix, or Heptodin) is a pill that is taken once a day, with almost no side effects, for at least one year or longer. A primary concern is the possible development of hepatitis B virus mutants during and after treatment. Approved in 1998 and available for both children and adults.

Adefovir dipivoxil (Hepsera) is a pill taken once a day, with few side effects, for at least one year or longer. The primary concern is that kidney problems can occur while taking the drug. Approved September 2002 and available only for adults. Pediatric clinical trials are being planned/scheduled.

It is important to know, 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.

### **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.

### **What other things can I do to keep myself healthy?**

One of the best things you can do for yourself is to take good care of your liver. Even if you don't feel sick, the virus can still damage your liver. We have included a list of 12 simple things you can do right now to stay healthier! But the most important advice is to find a good doctor get regular check-ups.

1. **Make sure you find a good doctor who is knowledgeable about hepatitis B.** A "liver specialist" is a doctor who specializes in liver disease. They usually have the most current information about hepatitis B testing, management and treatments.
2. **Get regular medical check-ups with your liver specialist or family doctor.** This should be at least once or twice a year, or more if needed. Make sure you see your doctor on a regular schedule whether you decide to start treatment or not. Ask lots of questions and get copies of all of your blood tests.
3. **Avoid alcohol or strictly limit the amount of alcohol you drink.** Medical studies show that alcohol is very damaging to the liver.
4. **Avoid smoking or stop smoking** because this is also very harmful to the liver.
5. **If you are a pregnant woman, tell your doctor that you have chronic hepatitis B.** Make sure your doctor gives the hepatitis B vaccine and hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) to your newborn baby immediately after delivery. This is very important because if your newborn is not protected within the first 12 hours of life, there is a 90% chance your baby will become chronically infected with hepatitis B. With proper treatment, there is more than a 95% chance your baby will be protected!
6. **Eat a healthy, balanced diet.** Although there is no specific diet for chronic hepatitis B, it is always good to eat lots of fresh fruits and vegetables, limit fat and junk foods, and drink plenty of water.
7. **Talk to your doctor before trying any herbs, vitamins, or fad diets.** Many herbs and fad diets can hurt your liver. Be very careful and talk to your doctor first before trying alternative treatments. Some herbs can even interfere with the medicines prescribed by your doctor, so you need to be cautious.
8. **Have your partner and other loved ones tested and vaccinated for hepatitis B.**
9. **Avoid spreading your blood to others.** Don't share sharp objects like razors, earrings, toothbrushes, or nail clippers.
10. **Use condoms to protect your sexual partners.**
11. **Avoid illegal street drugs.**
12. **Get the hepatitis A vaccine to protect yourself from another serious liver infection.**

### **What does my future look like if I have chronic hepatitis B?**

Fortunately, disease progression with chronic hepatitis B is usually slower than with other viruses such as the HIV/AIDS virus. If problems arise, it can be later in life. This is good news because with early testing, regular medical attention, and new treatment options, there is so much more to offer to those living with chronic hepatitis B. The future is much brighter for chronic carriers since scientists are discovering new drugs that work against hepatitis B and doctors are managing and treating hepatitis B more effectively.

### **Where can I get more information about testing, vaccinations, and treatment?**

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. If you speak English, please contact the Hepatitis B Foundation at 215-489-4900 or email us at [info@hepb.org](mailto:info@hepb.org).

## HEPATITIS B TREATMENTS

### **Is there a cure for chronic hepatitis B?**

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