

HEPATITIS B AND THE ASIAN COMMUNITY

Why are Asians at greater risk than Non-Asians?

Asians are at greater risk because to begin with, there are more Asian people infected with hepatitis B than non-Asians. Although hepatitis B is not an "Asian disease", it certainly affects hundreds of millions of Asians. Since the Asian community starts with such a large number of infected people, there is a much higher rate of infection. For more information about hepatitis B and the Vietnamese community, please read "[Dr. Trinh Talks About Hepatitis B](#)".

How is hepatitis B spread among Asians?

Asians and non-Asians can both get hepatitis B through contact with blood, unprotected sex, shared needles, and from an infected mother to her newborn baby during delivery. Jobs and lifestyle choices can also create an equal risk for both groups.

Most Asians, however, are infected with the hepatitis B virus as infants or young children – from an infected mother who unknowingly passes the virus to their newborn baby at birth. In addition, childhood infections are common – children can be exposed to blood from another infected child or family member with whom they live in close contact. On the other hand, non-Asians are most commonly infected as young adults through unprotected sex. As adults, their immune systems can usually get rid of the virus and most will recover from a hepatitis B infection.

What does it mean to be a "chronic carrier" of hepatitis B?

A person who is unable to get rid of the hepatitis B virus after six months is diagnosed as being a "chronic carrier". The virus can stay in their blood and liver for a lifetime and they can continue to pass the virus on to other people. 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. There are simple lifestyle changes a person can make to protect their health and several new drug treatments that can benefit those who show signs of active liver disease. The goal of all treatments is to reduce the risk of developing liver failure or liver cancer later in life.

Why should Vietnamese be worried about chronic hepatitis B infections?

It's very important to be tested for hepatitis B since 1 out of 4 chronic carriers of HBV will die from cirrhosis or liver cancer later in life. Early detection of chronic hepatitis B can improve the chances of preventing and surviving liver cancer through regular medical check-ups and new drug treatments. In addition, since most chronic carriers don't even know they are infected, they can unknowingly spread the virus to their loved ones. If people are not tested, then hepatitis B will continue to pass through several generations in one family and throughout the community.

According to the Asian Liver Center at Stanford University:

- Liver cancer is the second most common cause of cancer among Vietnamese-Americans.
- Liver cancer rates are 13 times higher for Vietnamese-American men, 8 times higher for Korean-American men, and 6 times higher for Chinese men than for non-Asian men.
- Liver cancer usually develops between 35 – 65 years of age.
- Some carriers can develop liver cancer as early as 30 years of age.
- An estimated 550,000 people in the world die of liver cancer each year.
- 80% of all liver cancer in the world is caused by chronic HBV infection.

- 1 out of 4 chronic HBV carriers will die from liver cancer or cirrhosis.
- Approximately one million chronic carriers in the world die each year from liver cancer or liver failure due to cirrhosis (this means there are 2,700 deaths/day, 114 deaths/hour, and 2 deaths/minute due to HBV!).

How can I stop the threat of hepatitis B?

The good news is that you can break the cycle of infection in your family and in the Vietnamese community. Get tested for hepatitis B. Make sure everyone in your family is vaccinated. Get the vaccine yourself. Find a good doctor who is knowledgeable about hepatitis B. Discuss treatment options with your doctor or a liver specialist if you have already been diagnosed with chronic hepatitis B.

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!

Visit the Hepatitis B Foundation's HBV Drug Watch

There are 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 approved and experimental treatments. This chart is available only in English at this time.

Where can I get more information about testing, vaccination 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 Vietnamese, English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean.

If you speak English, please contact the Hepatitis B Foundation by email at info@hepb.org or call us at 215-489-4900.