

General Information

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What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is the world's most common liver infection. 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 pregnancy or delivery. Most infected adults are able to get rid of the hepatitis B virus without any problems. However, some adults and most infected babies and children are unable to get rid of the virus and will develop chronic infections.

The good news is that there is a safe vaccine to prevent a hepatitis B infection and new treatments for those already infected with hepatitis B.

How many people are affected by hepatitis B?

Worldwide, 2 billion people (1 out of 3 people) have been infected with hepatitis B. 400 million people have become chronically infected (which means they are unable to get rid of the virus). An estimated 1 million people die each year from hepatitis B and its complications.

Why is hepatitis B so dangerous?

Hepatitis B is dangerous because it is a "silent infection" that can infect people without them knowing it. Most people who are infected with hepatitis B are unaware of their infection and can unknowingly pass the virus to others through their blood and infected bodily fluids.

For those who become chronically infected, there is an increased risk of developing serious cirrhosis and/or liver cancer later in life. The virus can quietly and continuously attack the liver over many years without being detected.

What is acute hepatitis B?

An "acute" hepatitis B infection refers to the first time a person has been exposed to the hepatitis B virus. Some people might feel like they have the flu, but most people don't have any symptoms after they are first infected.

For most healthy adults, it can take up to 6 months to successfully get rid of the virus. In other words, the immune system will fight off the virus within the first 6 months after the initial infection. During an acute infection, a person is contagious and able to pass the virus on to others.

90% of healthy adults are able to "recover" by getting rid of the virus, which is confirmed by a blood test. Once a person has recovered, they are no longer contagious and are immune to future hepatitis B infections.

What is chronic hepatitis B?

A person is diagnosed with chronic hepatitis B if they test positive for the hepatitis B virus for longer than 6 months. A chronic hepatitis B infection may stay with the person for a lifetime. About 10% of adults who contract hepatitis B will not be able to get rid of the virus and they develop a "chronic hepatitis B" infection.

Is there a cure for hepatitis B?

For an "acute" infection, there is generally no treatment other than rest and supportive measures to manage any symptoms. For "chronic" hepatitis B, there are 5 approved drugs in the US: Intron A, Pegasys, Epivir-HBV, Hepsera, and Baraclude. These drugs slow down the virus and reduce potential liver damage. In rare cases, they may even get rid of the virus completely. For a complete list of other promising drugs in development for hepatitis B, visit our [Drug Watch](#).