

GENERAL INFORMATION

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is the world's most common liver infection. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV), which can attack and injure the liver. Most adults are usually able to get rid of the hepatitis B virus and "recover" without any problems. But some adults, and unfortunately most infected babies and many children, will be unable to get rid of the virus. They are diagnosed as being "chronic carriers" of hepatitis B -- the virus can stay in their blood and liver for a long time. They can pass the virus on to other people.

The good news is that there is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B and new drugs for "chronic carriers" with active signs of disease who could benefit from treatment.

How many people are affected?

Two billion people around the world (almost 1 out of 3 persons) have been infected with the hepatitis B virus. Many people recover and get rid of the virus, but 400 million people have been unable to get rid of the virus and remain "chronic carriers" of the virus. Hepatitis B is most common in Asia, Southeast Asia, India, parts of Africa and South America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. In the United States there are more than one million Americans who have chronic hepatitis B infections.

Why should Chinese people be concerned about hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B can infect any person of any age or race, but Asians are at much higher risk for getting infected. Worldwide, 75% of all "chronic carriers" of hepatitis B are of Asian descent. Although hepatitis B is very common in China, it is also a problem among Chinese-Americans. As Chinese people move to the United States, and other countries, the virus travels with them.

One of the myths among Asians is that hepatitis B can be "inherited" since several generations in one family may be infected. But this is not a "genetic disease" -- hepatitis B is caused by a virus. Chinese families can break the cycle of hepatitis B infection by getting tested, vaccinated and treated.

How can I get hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an "infectious disease" that is spread through blood. Bodily fluids that contain blood can also pass the virus. Hepatitis B is spread through direct blood contact, unprotected sex, shared needles, and from an infected mother to her newborn baby during delivery. You cannot get hepatitis B from the air, from hugging or touching, from toilet seats or doorknobs. Hepatitis B is not spread through casual contact.

Who is most likely to get infected with hepatitis B?

Although everyone is at some risk for getting hepatitis B, there are some people who are more likely to get infected. Your job, lifestyle, or just being born into a family with hepatitis B can increase your chances of being infected. Here are some of the most common "high risk" groups, but please remember that this is not a complete list:

- People of Asian descent, especially if their parents have emigrated to the U.S.A.
- People who are married to or live in close household contact with someone who has hepatitis B. This includes adults and children.
- People who live in or travel to countries where hepatitis B is very common (Asia, India, parts of Africa and South America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East).
- People who have unprotected sex and/or have multiple sexual partners.
- Health care workers and others who are exposed to blood in their jobs.
- Patients who are on kidney dialysis or live in institutions.
- People who use illegal drugs.

Is there a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B?

Yes, all babies, children and adults can be vaccinated. The vaccine is very safe -- you cannot get hepatitis B from the vaccine. The best news is that it only takes two or three shots to protect yourself and your loved ones for a lifetime. Babies and children up to age 18 years can usually receive free vaccine from state health departments. Ask your doctor for the hepatitis B vaccine.

Should I get vaccinated?

In the United States, doctors recommend that all newborns and children up to age 18 years should be vaccinated. Adults are also at risk for hepatitis B, especially those of Asian descent. Talk to your doctor about getting the hepatitis B vaccine - protect yourself from a serious liver infection.

Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?

Yes, medical and scientific studies have shown it to be one of the safest vaccines ever made. More than one billion doses have been given throughout the world. 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 other possible side effects and whether you have any allergies before starting the vaccine series.

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

Since hepatitis B is spread through blood, you should avoid sharing sharp objects such as razors, toothbrushes, earrings, and nail clippers. Make sure that sterile needles are used for acupuncture, tattoos and body piercing. Avoid touching blood by using gloves or paper towels to protect your hands. Use bleach to clean up blood spills. Use condoms with sexual partners. Avoid using illegal drugs. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after touching any blood. *Most importantly, make sure you get vaccinated.*

How will I know if I have been infected with hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a "silent infection. Most people do not have any symptoms when they are infected. So they can have hepatitis B without even knowing it. Your doctor or local health clinic can order a simple blood test. The blood test can show whether you have been infected or not.

How many people "recover" from or become "chronic carriers" of hepatitis B?

The answer depends on whether you are infected as an adult, a child, or a baby. Adults usually "recover" because their immune systems can get rid of the virus. If a healthy adult is infected, they have a 90% chance of getting rid of the virus and a 10% chance of becoming chronically infected. Babies and children, however, are more likely to develop a chronic infection. Their immune systems have more difficulty getting rid of the virus. If a baby is infected, there is only a 10% chance of getting rid of the virus and a 90% chance of developing a chronic infection. Young children have a 40% chance of recovering and a 60% chance of developing a chronic infection. But everyone can be protected against hepatitis B infections through vaccination.

Where can I go to be tested?

You can ask your family doctor, the local health department, or a liver specialist to order the simple hepatitis B blood test. This blood test can be done in any doctor's office.

You can also call **1-888-888-0981**, which is the GlaxoSmithKline HBV Information and Assistance telephone helpline. This is a free phone call. Information about HBV and physician referrals across the country are available in English, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Vietnamese.

Are there any treatments if I have chronic hepatitis B?

Currently, there are three approved drugs in the United States for people who have chronic hepatitis B infections. These drugs are also available in China:

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, 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.

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