

## ABOUT HEPATITIS B INFECTIONS

### **If I am first infected with hepatitis B, will I feel sick?**

Hepatitis B is considered a "silent infection" because most people don't have symptoms when they are first infected. People can get hepatitis B without even knowing it. Some who are infected may have mild flu-like symptoms that are often ignored -- they think they just have a cold and then get better quickly. Others may go to a doctor because they feel more tired than usual, don't feel like eating, have an upset stomach, or complain about joint pain. Although severe symptoms are not common with a new hepatitis B infection, they could include a swollen stomach or eyes and skin turning yellow (this is called "jaundice"). See your doctor for any unusual symptoms or even if you just have questions.

### **What blood test should I ask my doctor to order?**

Make sure that your doctor orders the hepatitis B blood tests. This is a simple test that can be done in a doctor's office. If you think you have been recently infected with hepatitis B, it will take 4 -6 weeks before a blood test will show positive for the virus. Ask for a written copy of your blood tests. Make sure your doctor clearly explains your blood test results so that you know whether you have hepatitis B or not. You need to know whether you have recovered or whether you have become chronically infected. Your doctor may check your blood several times to confirm your diagnosis.

### **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.

### **What will happen if I get infected with hepatitis B?**

After a person is first infected with hepatitis B, there are usually three things that can happen:

1. **Recovery** - 90% of healthy adults who are infected will "recover" and be completely rid of the virus within six months. When a blood test shows that the hepatitis B virus has gone and that "antibodies" have been made, a person is then considered to have recovered. They are no longer contagious to others. The "antibodies" protect them from any future hepatitis B infections. These people do not need the vaccine since they are already protected.
2. **Chronic Infections** - 10% of infected adults are unable to get rid of the virus after six months. They are diagnosed as being "chronic carriers" of hepatitis B. This means that the virus stays in their blood and liver. People who are "chronic carriers" of hepatitis B are able to pass the virus on to others through their blood. They may also develop serious liver disease later on.
3. **Acute Liver Failure** - Less than 1% of infected adults can have a severe reaction and die from liver failure within several weeks after being exposed to the hepatitis B virus. Liver failure is life-threatening and a person must get immediate medical care. This is a very rare reaction.

## **What do all these numbers really mean?**

Imagine you are sitting in a room. There are 100 people in this room, including yourself. The door opens and the hepatitis B virus walks in and infects everyone. You all go home. Some people may feel sick a couple weeks later, most of you will not. Six months later everyone is asked to return to the room for a simple hepatitis B blood test. The good news is that 90 people will have gotten rid of the virus and "recovered". They can go home. But 10 people (maybe including you?) have been unable to get rid of the virus. These 10 people are then diagnosed as "chronic carriers". They are told to be careful to avoid infecting others, to test and vaccinate their loved ones, and to find a doctor who can provide good medical care. Although this is rare, one person may have an immediate severe reaction to the hepatitis B virus and die several weeks later from liver failure.

## **What happens to babies and children who are infected with hepatitis B?**

Unfortunately, babies and children have a lot more trouble getting rid of the virus after being infected. Their immune systems are too young to fight off the virus. So they are at much greater risk for becoming "chronic carriers" of hepatitis B. The virus will stay in their blood and liver for a long time, which increases their risk for serious liver disease later on.

1. **Recovery** - Babies under one year have a 5-10% chance of getting rid of the virus and "recovering". Children have a 40% chance of getting rid of the virus (whereas, adults have a 90% chance of recovering).
2. **Chronic Infections** - 90% of infected babies will never get rid of the virus and will become "chronic carriers" of hepatitis B -- the virus will stay in their bodies for a very long time. Children have a 60% chance of becoming "chronic carriers" (whereas, adults have only a 10% chance of becoming chronically infected).

## **How will I know if I have "recovered" from a hepatitis B infection?**

A person is considered to have "recovered" when blood tests show they have gotten rid of the virus. In addition, the test must show that their immune system has made a "surface antibody" against the virus. The "surface antibody" is what protects you from hepatitis B in the future. Until you recover, which can take up to six months, there is still a risk that you can spread the virus. Once you have recovered, then you can no longer infect others. Ask your doctor for this simple blood test.

## **Do I still need the hepatitis B vaccine after I have "recovered"?**

You do not need the vaccine if your blood tests show that you have recovered. The "surface antibody" that your immune system makes will protect you against any future hepatitis B infection. It works just like chicken pox: when you get chicken pox and recover, your body has successfully made antibodies to protect you from getting chicken pox again.

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

This means that you have been unable to get rid of the hepatitis B virus. You have become a "chronic carrier" of the virus. For some reason your immune system just can't fight off the hepatitis B virus. It can stay in your blood and liver for a long time. As a result, you can pass the virus on to others. You also live with an increased risk for serious liver disease later in life.

### **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!**

### **Where can I get more information about testing and hepatitis B?**

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. 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).