

Living with Chronic Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is the most common serious liver infection in the world. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV) which attacks liver cells and can lead to cirrhosis (scarring), liver failure or liver cancer later in life. The virus is transmitted through direct contact with infected blood and bodily fluids, and from a hepatitis B positive woman to her newborn during pregnancy or childbirth.

What happens if I am infected?

Hepatitis B is known as a "silent infection" because most people have few or no symptoms. Some people will be able to get rid of the virus on their own, while others may become chronically infected. Most healthy adults who are newly infected will be able to get rid of the virus and recover – this can take up to 6 months and is known as an acute infection. People who recover cannot spread the virus to others, and they cannot be infected with HBV again. Some adults, and most babies and young children who are infected are not able to fight off the virus and will develop a chronic, life-long infection. Whether an infection is acute or chronic, infected people can pass the virus on to others even if they have no symptoms.

How will I know if I have recovered or become chronically infected?

You should request that your doctor order the 3-part HBV blood panel, and provide you with a printed copy of the results. A person is diagnosed with a chronic HBV infection when they test positive for the hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg+) for more than 6 months. This means your doctor must repeat this test to determine if your infection is acute or chronic.

The 3-part Hepatitis B Panel includes the following blood tests:

- Hepatitis B Surface Antigen (HBsAg):** The "surface antigen" is part of the hepatitis B virus that is found in the blood of someone who is infected. If this test is positive, the person is infected and can spread the virus to others through blood and infected bodily fluids.
- Hepatitis B Surface Antibody (HBsAb or anti-HBs):** The "surface antibody" is formed in response to the hepatitis B virus. Your body can make this antibody if you have been vaccinated or if you have recovered from a hepatitis B infection. If this test is positive, then your immune system has successfully developed a protective antibody against the hepatitis B virus. This will provide long-term protection against future hepatitis B infection. Someone who is surface antibody positive is immune and protected against hepatitis B. They are not infected and cannot spread the virus to others.
- Hepatitis B Core Antibody (HBcAb or anti-HBc):** The "core antibody" does not provide any protection or immunity against the hepatitis B virus. A positive test only indicates that a person may have been infected with the hepatitis B virus at some point in their life. This test is often used by blood banks to screen blood donations. However, all three blood test results must be available for the doctor to make an accurate diagnosis.

How can I prevent spreading hepatitis B to others?

If you are infected, you can pass the virus on to others so it is important to take certain precautions. Sexual partners and close household contacts should be tested for HBV. If the blood tests show they are not infected or protected, then they should receive the HBV vaccine series, which can provide a lifetime of protection. To avoid transmitting HBV, it is important to practice safe sex, keep all cuts covered and avoid sharing any sharp personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, or earrings. *Hepatitis B is **not** transmitted casually and it **cannot** be spread through sneezing, coughing, hugging, eating a meal with someone, or eating food prepared by a person living with hepatitis B.*

What if I have hepatitis B and am pregnant?

Babies born to a mother with hepatitis B have a greater than 90% chance of developing chronic hepatitis B if they are not properly treated at birth. A pregnant woman who tests positive for HBV must make sure that her newborn baby receives the first dose of HBV vaccine (and one dose of HBIG, if available) in the delivery room or within the first 24 hours of life, preferably within 12 hours. It is very important to protect your newborn baby from a hepatitis B infection. ALL pregnant women should be tested for hepatitis B during pregnancy!

Is there any treatment for chronic hepatitis B?

The future looks very bright for those living with chronic hepatitis B. Although there is no complete cure for hepatitis B, there are promising treatments that can control and manage the virus. It is important to understand that not everyone with hepatitis B will need treatment, but everyone with chronic hepatitis B should be seen by a liver specialist at least once a year. Currently, there are several U.S. FDA approved drugs to treat chronic HBV infection. Your doctor will determine if you would benefit from these treatments, which have been shown to help reduce the risk of more serious liver damage and liver cancer from hepatitis B. There are also other new drugs in development and in clinical trials.

Are there herbal remedies and supplements that will help?

Many people are interested in using herbal remedies or supplements to boost their immune systems and help their livers. There is no regulation of these products, or scientific evidence that herbal remedies or supplements help with a hepatitis B infection. There is concern that some remedies or supplements could interfere with other medications, or even cause damage to your liver. There are many companies and people that make false promises on the Internet and through social media about their products. Online claims and patient testimonials on Facebook are fake and can trick people into buying expensive herbal remedies and supplements. If it sounds too good to be true, then it's probably not true.

How can I live a healthy lifestyle as someone with chronic hepatitis B?

Below is a Top 10 List of health decisions that you can start today!

1. **Schedule regular visits with your liver specialist** or health care provider who has experience treating people with hepatitis B to stay on top of your health and the health of your liver. Things can change over time even if you are in an "inactive" phase right now.
2. **Get the hepatitis A vaccine** to protect yourself from another virus that attacks the liver.
3. **Avoid drinking alcohol and smoking** since both will hurt your liver.
4. **Talk to your provider before starting any herbal remedies or vitamin supplements** because some could interfere with your prescribed hepatitis B drugs or even damage your liver.
5. **Check with your pharmacist about any over-the-counter drugs** (e.g. acetaminophen, paracetamol) or non-hepatitis B prescription drugs before taking them to make sure they are safe for your liver.
6. **Avoid inhaling chemical fumes** from paint, paint thinners, glue, household cleaning products, nail polish removers, and other potentially toxic chemicals that could damage your liver.
7. **Eat a healthy diet** of fruit, whole grains, fish and lean meats, and lots of vegetables. "Cruciferous vegetables" in particular – cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower – have been shown to help protect the liver against environmental chemicals.
8. **Avoid eating raw or undercooked shellfish** (e.g. clams, mussels, oysters, scallops) because they could be contaminated with a bacteria called *Vibrio vulnificus*, which is very toxic to the liver and could cause a lot of damage.
9. **Check for signs of mold** on nuts, maize, corn, groundnut, sorghum, and millet before using these foods. Mold is more likely to be a problem if food is stored in damp conditions and not properly sealed. If there is mold, then the food could be contaminated by "aflatoxins," which are a known risk factor for liver cancer.
10. **Reduce your stress** by eating healthy foods, exercising regularly, and getting plenty of rest.

Everything you eat, drink, breath, or absorb through the skin is eventually filtered by the liver.

So, protect your liver and your health!

For more information about HBV Treatments, Clinical Trials, Healthy Liver Tips, and Liver Specialists, please visit the Hepatitis B Foundation website at www.hepb.org.



The Hepatitis B Foundation is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to finding a cure and improving the quality of life for those affected by hepatitis B worldwide.

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