



# Atlantic County Division of Public Health

## *Questions and Answers about Hepatitis B*

### **What is hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B is an illness of the liver caused by infection with the hepatitis B virus.

### **Who can get hepatitis B?**

Anyone who had not already had hepatitis B illness or has not received the hepatitis B vaccine can get hepatitis B, but those at greatest risk are:

- Individuals who share needles or syringes with others to inject drugs
- Individuals who have multiple sex partners or a history of a sexually transmitted disease
- Health, dental, and emergency care personnel who have contact with blood
- Infants who are born to mothers who are infected with hepatitis B
- Household and sexual contacts of an infected person
- Staff and clients of hemodialysis units and institutions for the developmentally disabled
- Immigrants and adoptees from areas of the world where hepatitis B illness is frequent

### **How is hepatitis B spread?**

The hepatitis B virus is found in the blood and body fluids of an infected person. Blood is the most significant transmission source. It is passed from person to person through direct blood to blood contact via mucous membranes or broken skin. This can occur during sexual contact, by needle stick injury or sharing of IV needles, or from a mother to her baby at birth. Hepatitis B is not spread by casual contact or by contaminated food or water.

### **What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?**

An individual infected with hepatitis B may have no symptoms, or may have a range of symptoms including fatigue, poor appetite, fever and vomiting. The urine may become darker in color and the skin and the white part of the eye may become jaundiced (yellow in color).

### **How soon do symptoms occur?**

Symptoms of hepatitis B usually occur within 60 to 90 days after exposure to the hepatitis B virus, but they may occur anytime from 45 to 180 days after exposure, and occasionally up to nine months.

### **How is hepatitis B diagnosed?**

Hepatitis B is diagnosed by a blood test for hepatitis B virus and hepatitis B virus antibodies.

### **What is the treatment for hepatitis B?**



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There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B illness. Most individuals recover fully on their own within a few weeks. However, approximately 10% of individuals become chronic carriers of the hepatitis B virus. This means that the virus remains in their blood for the rest of their lives. Chronic infection with hepatitis B can lead to serious liver diseases, such as cirrhosis or liver cancer. Drug therapy for chronic hepatitis B infection is now available in the United States. This therapy is new and is successful in eliminating the hepatitis B infection 25% to 50% of the time. This success rate is expected to improve as better treatments become available.

### **How long is an infected person infectious to others?**

An infected person is capable of transmitting hepatitis B to others as long as the hepatitis B virus is circulating in his/her blood. This is usually 2 months before, and 2 months after the onset of their symptoms of hepatitis B illness. However, for carriers of hepatitis B, they are capable of transmitting hepatitis B for the rest of their lives.

### **What is hepatitis B immune globulin and what does it do?**

Immune globulins are antibodies that are extracted from serum. Hepatitis B immune globulin can prevent hepatitis B illness if it is given (by injection) within two weeks of exposure to the hepatitis B virus.

### **Is there a vaccine for hepatitis B?**

Yes, there is a vaccine for hepatitis B. The vaccine is available to all individuals, but it is especially recommended for individuals subject to unusual exposure to hepatitis B, such as laboratory personnel who work with the hepatitis B virus, travelers to countries with high rates of hepatitis B, people living in communities with high rates of hepatitis B, individuals with existing chronic liver disease, sexually active homosexual/bisexual men, and injecting drug users.

### **Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?**

Individuals infected with hepatitis B should not be excluded from work or school. Infected persons should be counseled however, regarding the precautions they should take to reduce the likelihood of exposing other individuals to their blood or body fluids.

### **How can hepatitis B be prevented?**

- Avoid sharing of toothbrushes, razors, needles and other personal care items
- Get the hepatitis B vaccine.

For more information, call the Atlantic County Division of Public Health at 609-645-5935.

*Information provided by the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services.*