

FAQ About Hepatitis B



What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B virus (HBV) is a serious liver infection. It can cause debilitating disease, including cirrhosis and liver cancer. Worldwide, up to 1 million people die annually from HBV. People with chronic HBV infection are 70%–85% more likely to die prematurely than the general population. Because the virus is transmitted through contact with infected blood or bodily fluids, **it is an occupational risk for health care personnel.**

How does hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is transmitted through direct contact with infected blood or bodily fluids. It is highly infectious, can be transmitted in the absence of visible blood, and remains infectious on environmental surfaces for at least 7 days.

Are health care professionals (HCP) at an increased risk for contracting hepatitis B?

Yes. Before hepatitis B vaccination was widely implemented, HBV infection was recognized as a common occupational risk among HCP. Prior to the vaccine, the prevalence of HBV infection in HCP was approximately 10 times greater than the general population. **The risk for occupationally acquired HBV among HCP persists, largely from exposures to patients with chronic HBV infection.**

How can I protect myself and those I care for?

Hepatitis B is preventable through a safe and effective vaccine. The vaccines have been available in the US since 1981 and were recommended by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) for HCP in 1982. The vaccine is a series of 2-4 shots, depending on the vaccine formula and health needs of the person getting vaccinated.

Who should get the vaccine? Is it recommended for health care professionals (HCP)?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends the hepatitis B vaccine for all newborns, children, and adults. **Due to their increased exposure risk, the ACIP reaffirmed in 2011 that HCP should be vaccinated.**

Is the vaccine safe and effective?

The vaccine provides lifelong protection. Over one billion doses have been given worldwide, with studies showing it is one of the safest and most effective vaccines ever made.

How do I know if I am already vaccinated against hepatitis B?

If you were born in the US after 1991, you may already be vaccinated. In 1991 the US adopted a strategy for universal HBV vaccination of infants. Many adults born before 1991 received “catch-up vaccination” (recommended since 1995). Check your personal medical records or ask your primary care doctor for your vaccination history. If you cannot confirm your vaccination status, it is safe to take the vaccine again, or a simple blood (titer) test can check for infection and/or immunity.

A few shots protect you and your loved ones against hepatitis B for a lifetime.

For more information about the Moving Needles project or hepatitis B see www.movingneedles.org or www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hbv.

