

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is an infection in the liver caused by the hepatitis B virus. It is the most common contagious liver disease and is 100 times more contagious than HIV. Though not commonly thought of as a sexually transmitted infection (STI), also called a sexually transmitted disease (STD), hepatitis B is often spread through sexual activity. Hepatitis B is a serious condition that can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure, and death.

PREVALENCE

The incidence of hepatitis B is highest in the 20 to 29 year old age group. In the US 300,000 people get this infection each year and about 1 million people who have been exposed to hepatitis B carry the virus in their bodies.

TRANSMISSION

Hepatitis B is transmitted by direct contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected person. This includes semen, vaginal secretions, saliva, sweat, and urine.

Transmission may occur through:

- Vaginal, oral or anal sex
- Kissing that involves an exchange of saliva, especially if there are small cuts inside the tongue or mouth
- Exposure to blood through cuts, open sores, or mucous membranes
- Sharing a razor, nail clippers, toothbrush, or pierced earrings of an infected person
- Sharing needles or syringes
- From an infected mother to her baby during childbirth.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms usually occur within 2 to 6 weeks but may occur 1 to 6 months after exposure to the virus. About 50% of people infected with hepatitis B do not know they are infected and can pass the virus on to others. Ten percent of people infected with hepatitis B become carriers of the virus. Carriers have the virus in their bodies the rest of their lives and can transmit the virus to other sexual partners, but do not necessarily develop any further health complications.

The most common symptoms include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Lack of appetite
- Dark-colored urine
- Light-colored stools
- Yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes (jaundice)
- Low-grade fever
- Extreme fatigue

DIAGNOSIS

Hepatitis B is diagnosed by a blood test. You can make an appointment to be tested at UHS or you can contact another testing site in Rochester.

TREATMENT

There is no specific treatment for Hepatitis B. Rest and a diet high in protein and carbohydrates help the liver repair itself. Most hepatitis cases are acute, and the infection lasts from 1 to 6 months, during which time the person is continually infectious. During this period of infection, alcohol and medications metabolized by the liver must be avoided and sexual activity is not recommended in order to prevent transmission to partner(s).

Although 90% to 95% of adults with hepatitis B recover completely, 5% to 10% develop chronic cases of hepatitis B. This means that the infected person continues to be highly contagious. Alpha Interferon and Lamivudine are two drugs licensed for the treatment of persons with chronic hepatitis B. These drugs are effective in up to 40% of patients; however, approximately 15 to 25% of chronic cases develop severe liver disease and death.

Caregivers must also protect themselves from direct, ungloved contact with blood and other body fluids of infected individuals. If your sex partner or a member of your household is found to have hepatitis B, you should consult your medical provider to be vaccinated.

PREVENTION

Hepatitis B is the only STI that can be prevented by a vaccine. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) now recommends vaccination for all newborns in order to prevent hepatitis B infection later in life. The vaccine is also recommended for medical providers and anyone that is in close contact with infected individuals. The vaccine consists of three shots given at 0, 1, and 6 months. The vaccine is highly effective and should be strongly considered. You can receive the vaccine series at UHS. Students can charge the cost of the vaccine to their tuition bill. Check with your medical provider if you are not sure if you have already been vaccinated.

SCHEDULING AN APPOINTMENT

The University Health Service (UHS) offers a full range of health care services for men and women. You can schedule an appointment with your primary care provider (PCP) by calling 275-2662. Women can also schedule an appointment with one of the women's health nurse practitioners. All visits to UHS are confidential.

LINKS

For more information about hepatitis B, you can visit:

Planned Parenthood
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/medicalinfo/sti/pub-hepatitis.xml>

CDC Fact Sheet
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/b/fact.htm>