

## Understanding Hepatitis B

Hepatitis is a condition of the liver. In fact, the term 'hepatitis' literally means 'inflamed liver'. Hepatitis can be caused by many different things including viral infections, parasites, bacteria, chemicals, auto-immunity, drugs or alcohol. Of these, viral infection is the most common cause of chronic (long-term) hepatitis.

Hepatitis B can lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer, and can even result in the need for a liver transplant. The good news is that hepatitis B can be prevented by vaccination.

### What Is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is one of the most common viral infections in the world. An estimated 350 – 400 million people have chronic hepatitis B and, as a result, have a high risk of developing cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver failure and liver cancer.<sup>1,2</sup> One million people die each year due to hepatitis B, making it the 10th leading cause of death worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

The hepatitis B virus is highly infectious – 50 to 100 times more infectious than HIV.<sup>4</sup> It is found in the body fluids of infected people (in blood, sweat, tears, breast milk and semen). It can be spread from mother to infant during birth, through unprotected sex or through blood-to-blood contact, which could occur through the sharing of needles, razors or toothbrushes.<sup>5</sup> Like the hepatitis C virus, the hepatitis B virus can survive for up to 1 week outside the body.<sup>6</sup>

### Symptoms of Hepatitis B

Symptoms occur in about 70% of adults who have hepatitis B. They may take several months after a person has been infected to appear, and include<sup>7</sup>

- Yellowing of skin or eyes (jaundice)
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite or nausea
- Darkening of urine
- Fever
- Aching joints

## Preventing and Treating Hepatitis B

People can protect themselves from hepatitis B infection by being vaccinated. However, for those already infected, treatment is the only option.

The main goal of treatment is to put the disease into remission. When this happens, viral load becomes very low, liver damage stops, and the risk of developing cirrhosis or liver cancer lessens.

### References

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