

Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a viral infection of the liver. The liver is one of the largest organs and a very important part of your body. Some of the functions of the liver include:

- It helps your body get rid of some medicines and harmful substances.
- It makes bile, which helps your body digest fats.
- It stores sugar, which your body uses for energy.
- It makes many proteins, which are the building blocks for all cells in the body.

When you have hepatitis, the liver is irritated (inflamed). It may be swollen and tender. Areas of liver tissue may be destroyed.

Hepatitis B is a serious, sometimes severe type of hepatitis. It can be life threatening. The good news is that there is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B.

What is the cause?

Hepatitis B is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). You can get the virus from contact with the blood or other body fluids of someone who is infected with the virus. For example, you can get it from:

- Having unsafe sex with someone who is infected
- Current or previous IV drug abuse
- Getting a piercing or permanent tattoo with nonsterile equipment
- Having contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person

A pregnant woman can pass the infection on to her baby if she is infected when the child is born.

You have a higher risk for infection if:

- You were born in Asia, Africa, and other regions with moderate or high rates of hepatitis B.
- Your parents are from an area with high rates of hepatitis B and you have not been vaccinated against hepatitis.
- You are a man who has sex with men.
- You have HIV.
- You are on hemodialysis.
- You are getting chemotherapy or immunosuppressive drugs.
- You are born to a mother with hepatitis B.
- You live or work in a residential institutional setting, such as a prison or a home for the developmentally disabled.

The disease can be spread by people who do not have any symptoms and may not know they carry the virus. These people are called asymptomatic carriers.

Hepatitis B is not spread by hugging or kissing, sneezing, coughing, or casual contact. It's not spread routinely through food or water. However, there have been instances in which hepatitis B has been spread to babies when they have received food that has been chewed by an infected person.

Because of improved blood screening methods, it is now rare for hepatitis B to be spread by a blood transfusion.

What are the symptoms?

You may not have any symptoms of hepatitis until several weeks or months after you are infected with the virus. Or you may never have any symptoms.

If you do have symptoms, they may include:

- Yellowish skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Tiredness
- Dark urine
- Abdominal pain
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Muscle and joint pain
- Fever

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your medical history and symptoms. Especially important is your history of hepatitis risk factors such as IV drug abuse or unsafe sex.

Your provider will look at your skin and eyes for signs of hepatitis. Your provider will check your belly to see if the liver is bigger than it should be or hurts when it is touched.

You will have blood tests. If blood tests show that your liver is not working normally, your provider will do tests to find out if a virus is causing the problems. Tests that find a virus will also determine the type of virus. (Several types of viruses can cause hepatitis.)

You may need to have a liver biopsy to check for damage to the liver. Your skin will be numbed and then a needle will be put through your skin and into your liver. The needle is used to get a small piece of the liver for tests.

How is it treated?

Your treatment will depend on whether your hepatitis B infection is new ("acute" in medical terms) or has been ongoing (chronic).

If your infection is acute, the usual treatment is rest and a healthy diet and lifestyle. Many people are able to fight off the virus in a few weeks. Your healthcare provider will recommend that you avoid alcohol for at least 6 months.

When you have hepatitis, alcohol speeds up damage to your liver and makes it harder for your body to fight the infection.

Usually it is not necessary to stay at the hospital. If you become too dehydrated from nausea and vomiting, you may need to go to the hospital to get intravenous (IV) fluids.

You will have tests every few weeks to check your liver to make sure your liver is starting to work normally and is not damaged.

If you have a chronic form of hepatitis B, your body is not successfully fighting the virus and you are at risk for serious liver damage. In this case you need careful medical monitoring and antiviral medicine. Antiviral drugs can slow or stop the virus from damaging the liver. You may be treated with more than 1 drug. The goal of treatment is not just to make you feel better, but to try to prevent damage to your liver.

If you have hepatitis B and are thinking about getting pregnant or could get pregnant, you should discuss this with your provider. Some antiviral medicines used to treat hepatitis can cause serious harm or death to an unborn baby. You will need to have a pregnancy test before you take these medicines to make sure you are not pregnant. You will also need to use 2 types of birth control and take monthly pregnancy tests while on the medicine. You will need to stop the medicine if you want to get pregnant. Tell your provider right away if you get pregnant while being treated for hepatitis.

If you are a man and your sexual partner is a woman of child-bearing age, be aware that some antiviral medicines can cause serious harm or death to an unborn baby. The baby can be affected even if you are the one taking the medicine. Contraception or abstinence must be used during and several months after treatment with this medicine. Talk to your provider about contraception.

If you have liver damage from hepatitis B, you need to protect yourself from other viruses that damage the liver. You may be given shots to keep you from getting hepatitis A. The shots help prevent more damage to your liver from this other type of hepatitis.

You may be tested for hepatitis C. There is no shot to prevent hepatitis C, but it's important for your provider to know if you are infected with both B and C viruses because this may change your treatment plan.

Doctors are continuing to search for the best ways to treat hepatitis B. As new information becomes available, treatments change. You should discuss possible new treatments with your healthcare provider.

How long will the effects last?

The symptoms generally last several weeks. Usually you will slowly get better until you have completely recovered. It may take 6 months before tests of your liver show that it is working normally again.

Some people who have hepatitis B develop the chronic form of the disease. This means the virus keeps affecting the liver for several months or years. Damage to the liver by the infection can scar the liver. This scarring of the liver is called

cirrhosis. The infection and damage might even cause the liver to stop working. This is called liver failure. Your healthcare provider will test your blood at your follow-up appointments for signs of chronic liver disease.

Hepatitis B infection increases your risk for liver cancer.

A liver transplant is a possible treatment for a failing liver, but whether you are a candidate for this surgery depends on several factors, including your overall health. Also, there are many more people who need a liver transplant than there are liver donors, so the wait for a liver to transplant may be long.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your healthcare provider's instructions for taking medicine for your symptoms. You need to avoid taking medicines that can damage the liver more (for example, acetaminophen). Ask your provider which medicines you can safely take for your symptoms, such as itching and nausea.
- Follow your provider's advice for how much rest you need and when you can go back to your normal activities, including work or school. As your symptoms get better, you may slowly start being more active. It is best to avoid too much physical exertion until your provider says it's OK.
- Eat several small, high-protein, high-calorie meals and snacks every day, even when you feel nauseated. Sipping soft drinks or juices, and sucking on hard candy may help you feel less nauseated.
- Don't drink alcohol unless your provider says it's safe.
- Ask your provider:
 - How and when you will hear your test results
 - How long it will take to recover
 - What activities you should avoid and when you can return to your normal activities
 - How to take care of yourself at home
 - What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if you have them
- Make sure you know when you should come back for a checkup. Keep all follow-up appointments.

How can I help prevent the spread of hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is very contagious for 2 to 6 weeks before you start having symptoms. And it keeps being contagious for some time after you start having symptoms. After you have been diagnosed, your healthcare provider will want to see you for follow-up. Your provider may test your blood to see if you are still contagious. Some people who get hepatitis B become chronic carriers of the virus, which means that they can keep infecting others even after they feel completely recovered. A blood test can find whether you are a chronic carrier.

To avoid spreading the disease to others:

- Don't let others come into contact with your blood or other body fluids, including saliva.
- Clean any blood spills or stains with a mixture of 1 part household bleach to 9 parts water.
- Cover your cuts and open sores.
- Don't share anything that might have blood on it, such as needles, toothbrushes, or razors.
- Avoid sexual contact with others until your provider says it's OK. Then practice safer sex by using latex condoms. If you are in a long-term relationship with one partner, ask your provider if you need to be using condoms.
- Don't donate blood, body organs, other tissues, or sperm.
- Tell your dentist and all health care providers that you have hepatitis B.

Three shots of the hepatitis B vaccine can prevent infection with the hepatitis B virus. All people who live with you should get the vaccine. The second shot is given 1 to 2 months after the first shot. The third shot is given 4 to 6 months after the first shot.

The hepatitis B shot is recommended if you:

- Are a healthcare worker
- Have chronic liver disease of any kind
- Have HIV
- Are a man who has sex with men
- Use IV drugs
- Have diabetes or kidney failure
- Are on dialysis
- Work or live in a residential institutional setting such as a prison or home for the developmentally disabled

All children should get hepatitis B shots. As recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and pediatricians, most newborns get their first hepatitis shot before they leave the hospital. Teenagers and young adults are also encouraged to get the shots if they didn't get the 3-shot series in infancy. Ask your healthcare provider if you need hepatitis B shots. A hepatitis B antibody blood test can see if you have had the shots or if your shots are still protecting you from hepatitis.

There are special concerns if you are pregnant and have hepatitis B or are at risk of getting hepatitis.

- If you do not have hepatitis B but your healthcare provider determines that you have an increased chance of getting infected with the virus, your provider may recommend that you get the hepatitis B shots to prevent infection. Although it is best to get this vaccine before you are pregnant, it can be given safely during pregnancy.
- If your blood test shows that you have hepatitis B, then you may need more blood tests to determine the chance that your baby will get hepatitis.

- A baby born to an infected mother should be given HBIG (hepatitis B immune globulin) and the first dose of the hepatitis vaccine within 12 hours after birth. This will help keep the baby from having chronic hepatitis B and from becoming a carrier of the hepatitis virus.
- If you have an active hepatitis B infection, ask your healthcare provider about breast-feeding your baby. In most cases, if the baby got the recommended shots right after birth, breast-feeding should be safe.

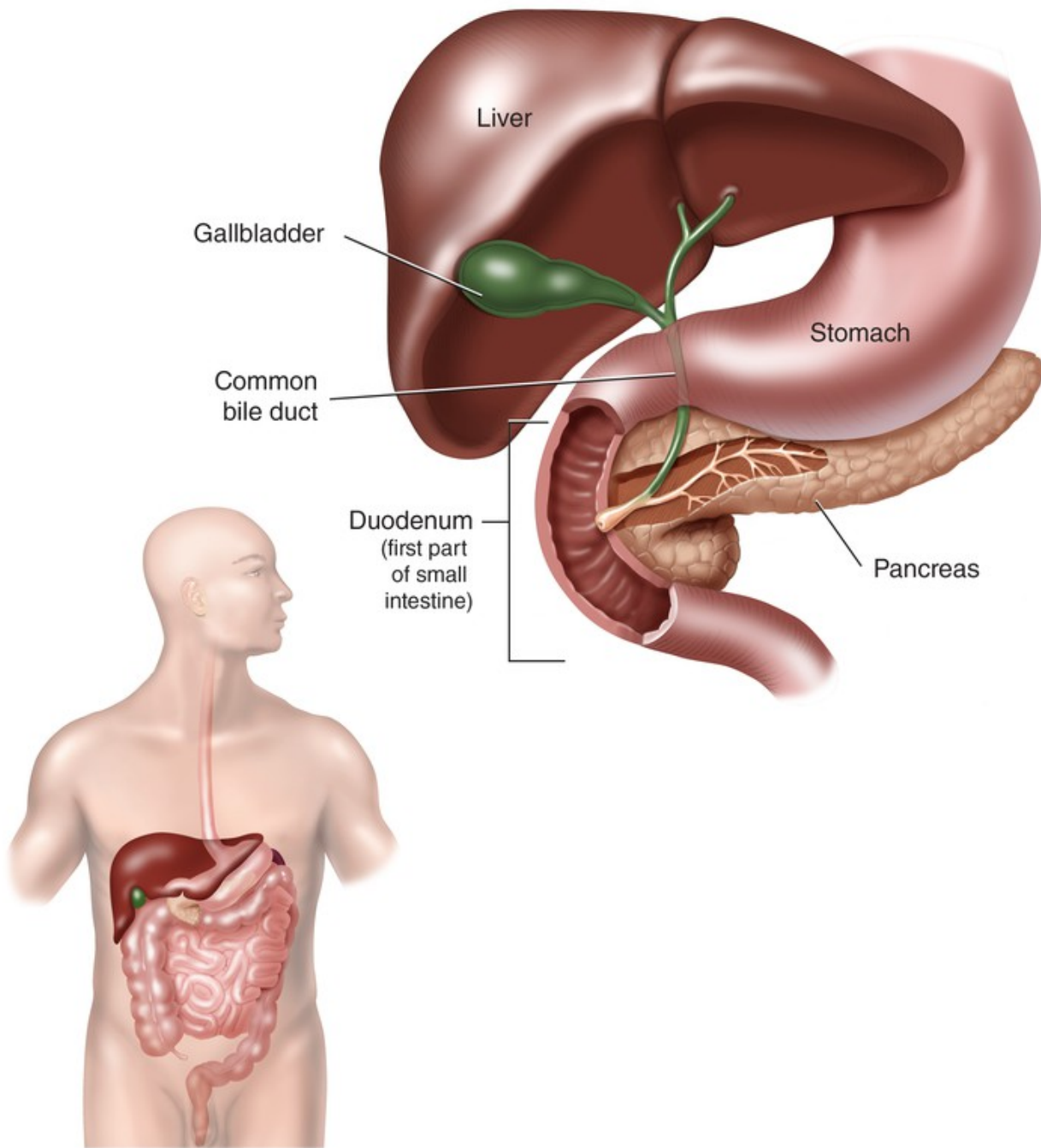
You can get more information from:

- American Liver Foundation
1-800-GOLIVER (465-4837)
<http://www.liverfoundation.org>

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Liver, Gallbladder, and Pancreas



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