

If you can pinpoint when you may have caught the infection this can help to calculate the length of time you have been infected. However, unless there was a particular time when you know you came into contact with infected blood, or you had an episode of jaundice, it is probably very hard to be certain when and how you were infected (jaundice is a yellowing of the skin and eyes and may have been accompanied with severe nausea and vomiting). More important is deciding what to do about it now and being safe so as not to infect anyone else.

Prevention of infection

The virus is carried round the body in the blood and is also in body fluids. So infection can occur through blood to blood contact or through unprotected sexual intercourse but not through normal social contact.

To make sure you do not infect someone else you just need to take common sense precautions, such as:

- cleaning thoroughly with undiluted bleach any surface that you bleed onto
- carefully dressing any cut or graze
- not sharing anything that is inserted through your skin including earrings, piercing jewellery and, of course, needles for injecting drugs or steroids
- preventing anyone else using anything that could have come into contact with your blood such as razors, toothbrushes, even hair or nail clippers. Also anything you could have bled onto, such as a straw or note for snorting drugs. Do not share pipes when smoking drugs like crack cocaine.
- never sharing anything used for injecting drugs, meaning water, spoons, filters as well as the syringes and needles themselves
- never having unprotected sex (unless your partner has been successfully vaccinated against hepatitis B).

For help and information

The Hepatitis B Foundation UK

The Great Barn
Godmersham Park
Canterbury
Kent
CT4 7DT

Helpline: Your call will be dealt with by a nurse, in strict confidence.

Opening times: Mondays to Thursdays, from 10.30am to 3pm.

Helpline number: 01227 738279

Website: www.hepb.org.uk

The British Liver Trust

2 Southampton Road
Ringwood BH24 1HY



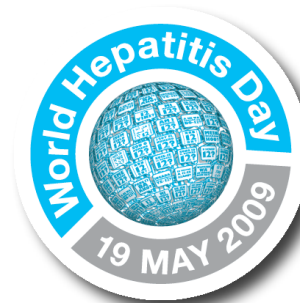
Helpline: 0800 652 7330

General enquiries: 01425 481320

Fax: 01425 481335

Email: info@britishlivertrust.org.uk

Website: www.britishlivertrust.org.uk



www.worldhepatitisday.info

Just diagnosed with hepatitis B?

If you have just been diagnosed with hepatitis B, you are not alone. Hepatitis B is much more common than people think.

Hepatitis B can cause liver damage but this does not occur in all cases and, if it does occur, it happens over many years. So you have time to let the diagnosis sink in and find out about the options open to you, including treatment. Although it is a serious disease, it is not a death sentence and there is effective treatment available.

The liver is involved in many different important functions of the body and a healthy liver is essential for good health. Many people with hepatitis B have no symptoms or their symptoms are vague and may be similar to that of a flu like infection.

The most common symptoms are:

- Fatigue
- Muscle or joint pain
- Fever
- Mild nausea (feeling sick), stomach ache, vomiting, diarrhoea and loss of appetite

What happens next?

You should see your GP who will have received a letter from the pharmacy. Your GP will recommend that anyone you are in close contact with should receive a hepatitis B vaccination and will arrange this with you. Your GP will then refer you to a specialist at a hospital. At the hospital you will have some further blood tests to assess how active the infection is and whether it is causing your liver to be inflamed at present.

The blood tests will also help to establish if you have recently contracted the virus which could clear up naturally or whether it is more likely to be an ongoing chronic (long term) infection. You may also have tests such as an ultrasound scan or liver biopsy to see if your liver has been damaged. The specialist will then talk to you about treatment options if treatment is required.

Treatment

A large number of people with a chronic hepatitis B infection do not require treatment as, although they do have the virus in their system, it is not causing any damage to their liver. However, this situation can change so it is important that anyone with hepatitis B is followed up by a doctor over the long term.

There are a number of drugs available to treat hepatitis B, used either alone or in combination. Treatment, however, is a complex issue and is something your doctor will discuss with you. The main aim of current treatment is to keep the hepatitis B virus suppressed which should prevent liver damage occurring.

Occasionally a course of these drugs can leave the virus in remission with its activity significantly reduced and treatment can eventually be discontinued.

Very rarely the treatment can clear the virus completely. Many new drugs are in development that may improve the effectiveness of treatment further.

What you can do

There is a lot you can do to help support your liver and your immune system and you may also find this helps reduce your symptoms.

Almost everything you eat, drink, smoke, swallow or absorb through your skin goes through the liver so the less toxic that is, the less your liver has to cope with. In particular, try to:

- reduce your alcohol intake as much as possible. If you can, stop completely.
- drink plenty of water
- eat less fatty or fried food and avoid processed food or food which is high in chemical additives
- eat more food that is high in anti-oxidants such as fresh fruit and vegetables
- get enough rest and exercise
- ask for support when the disease or the symptoms get you down

Sexual transmission

Because hepatitis B can be passed on during sex it is important that a person with hepatitis B uses barrier methods of contraception such as condoms. However, there is a safe and effective vaccination available against hepatitis B which gives lifelong immunity.

Sexual partners of people with hepatitis B should be first tested and then vaccinated. Once this has been done and the effectiveness of the vaccine has been confirmed with a follow-up blood test then normal sexual relations can resume between partners. You should always use condoms during casual sexual encounters.

Can a mother pass the virus to her child?

Yes, women infected with hepatitis B who become pregnant can pass the virus onto their baby during the delivery process. However this can be prevented by the baby receiving a course of vaccinations which is started soon after birth. If mothers have a high level of infectiousness then the baby may also require an injection of hepatitis B immunoglobulin which offers an immediate active immunity against the virus.

Breastfeeding

Women with hepatitis B are encouraged to breastfeed their newborns as the benefits of breastfeeding far outweigh the risk of infection as long as the baby is vaccinated.

Who to tell?

You should contact promptly anyone you think should get tested. Otherwise you can take your time to tell people when **YOU** are ready, after you have more information and have come to terms with your diagnosis. Telling someone you have hepatitis B may provide support. However, you do not have to tell other people at all and before deciding to tell your employer you may find it useful to talk to someone else with hepatitis B.