What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis is a condition in which the liver is inflamed and unable to function properly. Hepatitis B is caused by a virus.

People who have Hepatitis B may not show any symptoms at all. However, some people may have symptoms like:

- jaundice (yellowing of the skin)
- dark coloured urine
- pale stools
- fever
- prolonged tiredness
- poor appetite
- abdominal pain
- nausea and vomiting.

Is Hepatitis B serious?

YES, Hepatitis B is very serious. It can lead to complications like:

- acute hepatitis (episode of liver inflammation)
- chronic hepatitis (permanent liver inflammation)
- liver cirrhosis (permanent scarring and hardening of the liver)
- liver failure
- liver cancer.

Those who recover completely from Hepatitis B infection are immune to the disease. However, 1 in 10 people who get infected with the virus become carriers. A carrier is someone who carries the Hepatitis B virus permanently in his body. Hepatitis B carriers seldom show any symptoms. However, they can:

- spread the disease to others
- develop serious liver complications such as those above.

Can I get Hepatitis B?

If you have never been immunised or do not have antibodies from having a previous Hepatitis B infection, you are at risk of Hepatitis B infection.

The Hepatitis B virus is spread through the following ways:

- sexual contact with an infected person
- from an infected mother to her newborn during childbirth
- during acupuncture, body or ear piercing and tattooing if the needles used are contaminated with a Hepatitis B infected person's blood
- sharing of injection needles among drug abusers
- accidental cuts to the skin by a nail clipper, shaving blade or other instruments that are contaminated with a Hepatitis B infected person's blood
- contact with an infected person's blood through cuts or sores in the mouth or skin.

To minimise your risk of Hepatitis B infection, avoid situations that put you at risk.
How can I protect myself from Hepatitis B?

Get vaccinated!
The Hepatitis B vaccine is safe. It is also extremely effective provided you complete all 3 doses:
1st dose – at the appointed date
2nd dose – 1 month after the 1st dose
3rd dose – 5 months after the 2nd dose
Make sure you complete all 3 doses.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How do I check if I am a Hepatitis B carrier?
A simple blood test can tell if you are a carrier, are immune or need immunisation. See your family doctor regarding this blood test.

2. What should I do if I have been diagnosed to be a Hepatitis B carrier?
If you are a carrier:
– you will need to see your doctor regularly, usually every 6 months to a year, for follow-up tests
– your family members should go for blood tests and get immunised if they are not immune
– you must take precautions to prevent the spread of Hepatitis B to your family and loved ones (see page on “Can I get Hepatitis B?”).

3. Can I get Hepatitis B through kissing a carrier?
No, the risk is low, unless there are cuts or sores in your mouth and/or in the mouth of the carrier.

4. Is Hepatitis B part of the National Childhood Immunisation Programme?
Yes, it was integrated into the Programme from 1 September 1997.

5. What is the difference between Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B?
Hepatitis A is spread through eating food contaminated with the Hepatitis A virus. Examples include partially cooked shellfish (oysters, clams) or in situations where there is poor hygiene (food/drink/utensils contaminated with an infected person's faeces). Most people suffer an acute episode and upon recovery have immunity to Hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B is spread by contact with blood or sexual fluids of an infected person or from an infected mother to her newborn during childbirth (see page on “Can I get Hepatitis B?”).

6. Is liver cancer common?
Liver cancer is the 3rd most common cancer among men in Singapore. The main risk factor for liver cancer is Hepatitis B infection.

7. Do I need the Hepatitis B vaccine?
Yes, please get yourself immunised against Hepatitis B if you are not a carrier or not already immune. Around 1 in 35 adult Singaporeans are Hepatitis B carriers. Hepatitis B vaccination is your best protection.

The Hepatitis B vaccine is safe and effective. Not being protected can lead to complications like liver cancer which are serious and expensive to treat.

Protect yourself and your family. See your family doctor and get immunised against Hepatitis B today!

For more information, visit www.hpb.gov.sg or call HealthLine at 1800 223 3313.