

# Hepatitis B

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## What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a viral infection of the liver. Hepatitis B can cause damage to the liver and create other health problems. Hepatitis B infection can be acute or chronic.

Acute Hepatitis B virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the Hepatitis B virus. Acute infection can — but does not always — lead to chronic infection.

Chronic Hepatitis B virus infection is a long-term illness that occurs when the Hepatitis B virus remains in a person's body.

## How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B is spread by direct contact with infected blood or body fluids. The most common ways the virus is spread is through unprotected sexual contact, sharing needles used for injecting drugs or medication, and accidental needle sticks among health care workers. It can also be spread through unsanitary tattooing practices and piercing or from mother to child.

When infected blood, semen, or vaginal fluids come into contact with mucous membranes or through breaks in the skin, the virus may be passed to the uninfected person.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

Symptoms of hepatitis B include lack of appetite, weight loss, yellowing of the skin or eyes, fever, nausea and vomiting, muscle and joint pain, itching skin, dark-colored urine, and light-colored stools.

Most children and about half of adults who get hepatitis B don't have symptoms at all. However, others become so ill they need to be hospitalized.

A blood test for hepatitis B may not show the infection until two to six months after exposure to the virus. Symptoms appear from six weeks to six months after exposure and last for several weeks to six months.

Most people are contagious several weeks before symptoms appear, and for as long as the virus is in their body.

## What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There is no specific treatment for acute hepatitis B infection. It is important to have a doctor follow the course of the infection. Doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids. Some people may need to be hospitalized.

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### Calhoun County Public Health Department

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People with chronic Hepatitis B virus infection should seek the care or consultation of a doctor with experience treating Hepatitis B. People with chronic Hepatitis B should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease and evaluated for possible treatment. Several medications have been approved for Hepatitis B treatment, and new drugs are in development. However, not every person with chronic Hepatitis B needs to be on medication, and the drugs may cause side effects in some patients.

### **Are there complications from hepatitis B?**

Approximately 95% of people infected as adults will recover completely and will not become chronically infected. However, 90% of infected infants and 25%-50% of children aged 1-5 years will become chronic carriers of the disease. Carriers can spread the disease to others and may develop liver cancer and/or cirrhosis (damage to liver cells). Death occurs in a very small number of active infections.

### **How can hepatitis B be prevented?**

The best way to prevent hepatitis B is to get vaccinated against the disease. The vaccine is a series of three shots available from most health care providers or the Calhoun County Public Health Department. Other prevention measures include:

- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or other personal items that may become contaminated with blood.
- Avoid direct contact with another person's blood or body fluids. If a surface is contaminated, wear latex gloves and clean with a water/bleach solution.
- Do not use illegal intravenous drugs and never share needles.
- If you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing, remember that you can get infected if the tools have not been cleaned properly or if the artist does not wear clean gloves with each new customer.
- Practice safer sex. A mutually faithful relationship with one other person is safest. Use a new latex condom every time you have sex.

### **How do I get more information on hepatitis B?**

Calhoun County Public Health Department  
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Phone: 800-CDC-INFO  
Web Site: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/B/index.htm>

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Updated 4/17/12

This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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