

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B (formerly known as serum hepatitis) is a liver disease caused by a virus. The disease is fairly common.

Who gets hepatitis B?

Anyone can get hepatitis B, but those at greater risk include:

- drug users who share needles; certain health care workers who have contact with infected blood;
- persons who have unprotected sex with multiple partners;
- people who live in institutions such as developmental centers;
- hemodialysis patients;
- certain household contacts of an infected person.

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis B virus can be found in the blood and, to a lesser extent, saliva, semen and other body fluids of an infected person. It is spread by direct contact with infected body fluids, usually by needle stick injury or sexual contact. Hepatitis B virus is not spread by casual contact.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

The symptoms of hepatitis B include tiredness, poor appetite, fever, vomiting and occasionally joint pain, hives or rash. Urine may become darker in color, and then jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. Some individuals may experience few or no symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear 1½ to six months after exposure, but usually within three months.

How long is a person able to spread the virus?

The virus can be found in blood and other body fluids several weeks before symptoms appear and generally persists for several months afterward. Approximately 6 to 10 percent of infected adults become long-term carriers of the virus; this percentage is much higher (70-90%) for children infected very early in life.

What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

No special medicines or antibiotics are usually prescribed to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed for uncomplicated cases.

What precautions should hepatitis B carriers take?

Hepatitis B carriers should follow good hygienic practices to ensure that close contacts are not directly contaminated by their blood or other body fluids. Carriers must not share razors, toothbrushes or any other object that may become contaminated with blood. In addition, susceptible household members, particularly sexual partners, should be immunized with hepatitis B vaccine. It is important for carriers to inform their dentist and health care providers about their carrier status.

How can hepatitis B be prevented?

A vaccine to prevent hepatitis B has been available for several years. The vaccine is safe and effective. It is given to all babies when they are born and also is recommended for people in high-risk settings who have not already been infected. A special hepatitis B immune globulin is also available for people who have been exposed to the virus. It may help prevent the disease if it is given within two weeks of exposure. In the event of exposure to hepatitis B, consult a doctor or the local health department.

