

Information sheet about pathogens in humans – vaccinations keep you safe!

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an inflammation of the liver caused by hepatitis B viruses. After an infection, most people are either slightly ill or have no symptoms. In adults, hepatitis B usually clears up on its own. However, it can also persist for a long time (chronically) and lead to severe damage to the liver in the long term. Hepatitis B viruses occur with very different levels of frequency worldwide.

How is hepatitis B transmitted?

Person-to-person

Hepatitis B viruses can be present in large quantities in the blood of infected people. Therefore, even the smallest amounts of blood are sufficient for the transmission of the viruses, if they enter the body through small injuries to the skin or through the mucous membranes. In smaller quantities, the virus is also found in other body fluids such as saliva, semen or vaginal fluid. You can also get infected during sex. If a pregnant woman is infected with the hepatitis B virus, the viruses can be transmitted to the child during birth. It is rare that the virus is transmitted to the child during pregnancy.

Through contaminated objects

Hepatitis B viruses can survive outside the body for some time. Therefore, you can also get infected through shared objects, for example, through sex toys, syringes, razor blades or toothbrushes.

What symptoms do the patients show?

In the case of a hepatitis B infection, you may not notice any symptoms. But you may feel tired and have no appetite. You may feel pain in your head and limbs. Abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting may occur. You may also have a mild fever. Your skin and the white of your eyes may turn yellow. This is called jaundice. Jaundice can cause the skin to itch severely. Urine may also turn dark and stools may look lighter than normal. You may also be seriously ill after an acute infection.

A hepatitis B infection very often clears up on its own. However, if you develop a prolonged (chronic) disease, your liver can be permanently damaged. After a few years, the damage can lead to secondary diseases such as cirrhosis of the liver (advanced scarring and shrinking of the liver) and liver cell cancer.

What's the incubation period – and how long are you contagious?

After infection with the hepatitis B virus, it may take a few weeks or months before symptoms develop. During the symptom-free period after infection, it is particularly easy to infect other people as the amount of virus in the blood is at its highest shortly before the outbreak of the disease. The time it takes until the outbreak of the disease in an individual can vary from person to person and depends mainly on the number of viruses transmitted. When the disease has cleared up, a person is usually no longer contagious and develops lifelong immunity. You will not be able to get infected with hepatitis B again. Chronically infected people can carry the viruses unnoticed for many years and be contagious.

Who is particularly at risk?

The people most at risk of contracting a hepatitis B infection include:

- ▶ People who frequently change their sex partners
- ▶ People who inject themselves with drugs and also use other people's syringes or needles
- ▶ People who have close contact with people with hepatitis B

In people with a weakened immune system, hepatitis B can more easily lead to serious secondary liver diseases.

What should I do if I fall ill?

- ▶ A hepatitis B infection is detected by a blood test.
- ▶ In the acute phase of the disease, you should avoid physical exertion as much as possible. Bed rest makes sense depending on the severity of the disease.
- ▶ In the early stages of the disease, you should eat a diet that is high in carbohydrates and low in fat.
- ▶ It is particularly important to avoid alcohol.

- ▶ Do not share nail scissors, toothbrushes or razors with other people.
- ▶ In case of an active infection, use condoms consistently during sex if the sex partner is not successfully immunized against hepatitis B. Use condoms even if you have no symptoms after an infection.
- ▶ A chronic infection can be treated well with medication so dangerous consequential damage can usually be prevented. Medication can inhibit the progression of virus replication and the disease, but does not eliminate the infection and therefore usually needs to be taken in the long term.

If you work in the healthcare sector, you must inform your employer or the relevant occupational health service about your illness.

How can I protect myself?

Vaccination

Vaccinations are available to protect against hepatitis B. Vaccination is recommended by the Standing Committee on Vaccination (STIKO) for infants and young children. Vaccination is also recommended for adults who are particularly at risk. These include:

- ▶ People with a weak immune system
- ▶ People whose immune system is to be suppressed by medication (for example, before an organ transplant)
- ▶ People expected to get seriously ill as a result of the disease (for example, people with HIV or hepatitis C)
- ▶ Dialysis patients
- ▶ People at increased risk of infection, such as staff in medical institutions or family members and partners of people with a hepatitis B infection
- ▶ People whose sexual behavior could lead to a high risk of infection

Hygiene

- ▶ To protect yourself from being infected with hepatitis B during sex, you can use condoms and so-called dental dams. Dental dams are very thin sheets that can protect against infections during oral sex.
- ▶ Syringes and other materials for drug consumption should not be used together.
- ▶ If you work in a profession with an increased risk of infection (for example, healthcare workers, sex workers, tattoo artists), special hygiene rules apply to protect against hepatitis B. Information about this can be obtained from your employer or the responsible health authority.

Preventive measures after contact or injury

If you suspect that you may have been infected, you should take preventive measures provided by a doctor as soon as possible. The measures are based on the vaccination protection of the person concerned, amongst other things.

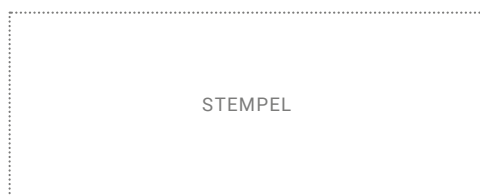
HEPATITIS B

Where can I find out more?

The local health authority can provide you with further advice. Since hepatitis B must be reported, it has information on the current situation and experience in dealing with the disease.

You can obtain advice and further information from the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) by telephone on 0221 – 89 20 31 or on the Internet at www.liebesleben.de. The detailed vaccination recommendation for children and young people can be found in STIKO's current vaccination calendar and at www.impfen-info.de/impfempfehlungen.

Answers to frequently asked questions about the vaccination against hepatitis B can be found in the FAQs of the Robert Koch Institute (www.rki.de/hbv).



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