

# Hepatitis B

## Patient Fact Sheet

### What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a contagious liver disease that ranges in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness. It results from infection with the hepatitis B virus. Hepatitis B can be either “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 HBV. Acute infection can - but usually does not - lead to chronic infection.

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

The younger a person is when infected with hepatitis B virus, the greater his or her chance of developing chronic hepatitis B.

Hepatitis B virus is contained in blood and body fluids. It is passed from person to person when blood, semen, or other body fluid infected with the virus enters the body of a person who is not infected. You cannot get hepatitis B by shaking hands or hugging someone. It is also not spread through food or water.

People can become infected with the virus during activities such as:

- ▶ Birth (spread from an infected mother to her baby during birth)
- ▶ Sex with an infected partner
- ▶ Sharing needles, syringes, or other drug-injection equipment
- ▶ Sharing items such as razors or toothbrushes with an infected person
- ▶ Direct contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person
- ▶ Exposure to blood by sticks from needles or other sharp instruments

Although anyone can get hepatitis B, some people are at greater risk, such as those who:

- ▶ Have sex with an infected person
- ▶ Have multiple sex partners
- ▶ Have a sexually transmitted disease
- ▶ Are men who have sexual contact with other men
- ▶ Inject drugs or share needles, syringes, or other drug equipment
- ▶ Live with a person who has chronic hepatitis B
- ▶ Are infants born to infected mothers
- ▶ Are exposed to blood on the job
- ▶ Are hemodialysis patients
- ▶ Travel to countries with moderate to high rates of hepatitis B

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**People can have hepatitis B  
infection and not know it.  
People can pass the virus to  
others and not know it.**

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**U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs**

Veterans Health  
Administration

## Hepatitis B Vaccination

### Should I get the hepatitis B vaccination?

You may need the vaccination against hepatitis B if you have not previously been vaccinated against hepatitis B AND you have any of the following reasons for receiving the vaccination:

- ▶ Chronic hepatitis C
- ▶ Alcoholic hepatitis
- ▶ Liver cirrhosis or liver fibrosis
- ▶ Other chronic liver disease
- ▶ Awaiting or received liver transplant
- ▶ Complications of liver disease (such as esophageal varices)
- ▶ HIV infection
- ▶ Use of injection drugs currently or in the past
- ▶ Have a sex partner who has hepatitis B
- ▶ Have had more than one sex partner in the past 6 months
- ▶ Men who have sex with men
- ▶ Share a household with someone who has chronic hepatitis B
- ▶ Travel to countries with high or intermediate rates of hepatitis B infection (there are high rates of hepatitis B in China and other part of Asia, in the Amazon, and in the southern parts of eastern and central Europe; there are intermediate rates of hepatitis B in the Middle East and Indian subcontinent)
- ▶ Reside or work in a prison or correctional facility
- ▶ People with end-stage renal disease, including patients receiving dialysis
- ▶ People who are seeking evaluation or treatment for a sexually transmitted disease (STD)
- ▶ Work in a high-risk profession with reasonable anticipation of risk of exposure to blood or body fluids, such as:
  - Health care facilities
  - Dialysis centers
  - Emergency response or firefighting
  - Law enforcement
  - Military
- ▶ Clients and staff in the following settings:
  - Institutions and non-residential daycare facilities for persons with developmental disabilities
  - STD treatment facilities
  - HIV testing and treatment facilities
  - Facilities providing drug-abuse treatment and prevention
  - Health care settings that target services to injection-drug users or men who have sex with men
  - Facilities for chronic hemodialysis patients

If you have diabetes, and you are 19-59 years old, you should receive a hepatitis B vaccination. If you have diabetes and are 60 or older, discuss the vaccine with your health care provider. Certain ethnic groups have higher rates of hepatitis B virus infection. You may need the vaccination if you are African American, Latino, Native American, Haitian, Alaskan Native, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, or Filipino.

People with the following conditions should discuss hepatitis B vaccination with their doctor: pregnancy, immunosuppression due to medications or conditions such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, chronic lung disease, asplenia, chronic alcoholism.

*If you have already been vaccinated, or if you are not sure, talk with your health care provider. Your health care provider may check to see if you have antibodies against hepatitis B. This can be done through a specific blood test.*

### Should pregnant or breast-feeding women receive the hepatitis B vaccination?

Pregnancy is not a contraindication to vaccination. Some data suggest that developing fetuses are not at risk of adverse events when hepatitis B vaccine is administered to pregnant women.

### Do I need to be tested for hepatitis B before getting the vaccination?

This is not required. If you have antibodies to hepatitis B, it means that you were infected with hepatitis B in the past, or you were previously vaccinated for hepatitis B. Either way, you don't need to get the hepatitis B vaccination if you already have antibodies to hepatitis B.

### How is the hepatitis B vaccine given?

The hepatitis B vaccine is a "recombinant vaccine," which means that it is a fragment of the hepatitis B virus that has been produced in a laboratory. The vaccination for hepatitis B is given as 3 injections over a 6-month period - an initial dose, followed by a second dose 1 month later, and a third dose 5 months after the second.

If you need hepatitis A vaccination in addition to hepatitis B, you can do these individually or as a combined vaccine that covers both. The combination vaccine is given as 3 injections over a 6-month period—an initial dose, followed by a second dose 1 month later, and a third dose 5 months after the second.

**If you are not able to get the shots on time, it is not necessary to restart the series, but you should continue from the last dose given.**

**You will NOT get hepatitis B from the vaccine.**

You will be protected for about 13 years. If it has been many years since you received your hepatitis B vaccination, or if you do not know when you were vaccinated, ask your doctor to check to see if you have antibodies against hepatitis B.

### What should I do if I am exposed to the hepatitis B virus?

If you know you were recently exposed to the hepatitis B virus, you may get protection from an injection of hepatitis B immunoglobulin (HBIG), which is different from the hepatitis B vaccine.

HBIG is given only when it is suspected or known that someone has been infected with hepatitis B, and it is given within 24 hours after the exposure. HBIG will protect you for 3 to 6 months, but it is strongly recommended that you also begin the 3-shot hepatitis B vaccination series within 7 days of your exposure.

### What are the side effects of the hepatitis B vaccine?

There are very few side effects caused by the vaccine, but you may experience soreness at the injection site. You will NOT get hepatitis B from the vaccine. Pregnant women have received the hepatitis B vaccine with no risk to their babies.

### Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local VA medical center and visit [www.hepatitis.va.gov](http://www.hepatitis.va.gov)

More information is available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at [www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/hepb](http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/hepb)

## Vaccines Available for Hepatitis B

There are 2 vaccines for hepatitis B on the market.  
There is 1 combination vaccine on the market for hepatitis A and B together.

### VACCINATION SCHEDULE

	Month 0	Month 1	Month 6
Hepatitis A	*		*
Hepatitis B	*	*	*
Hepatitis A and B combination	*	*	*