

# Hepatitis B and how to protect yourself from it

Published 20 December 2005. Updated 25 October 2011.

Hepatitis B is a viral inflammation of the liver. Approximately 20-30 % of intravenous drugs users have been infected by it. For approximately 5-10 % of those infected, the illness becomes chronic.

The symptoms usually appear after two or three months, but can also become evident even after six months. The most common symptoms include loss of appetite, fever, fatigue, joint pain and stomach and muscle aches. The most visible symptoms are jaundice, darkened urine and greyish faeces. The symptoms last for a few weeks. Only approximately 40 % of those infected exhibit symptoms.

Hepatitis B is diagnosed by a blood test. The illness can be diagnosed 8-12 weeks after the infection at the earliest. The antibodies stay in the blood and show up in the test even if the illness itself has already passed. The test result is relatively reliable for up to six months after suspected infection.

The acute stage of the illness does not require special treatment, usually only rest is needed. Some patients, however, require hospital care. Most of those infected with Hepatitis B recover and do not become infected again, having developed a resistance. A small percentage of the patients remain carriers of the virus and may infect others. Some of these may develop cirrhosis or cancer of the liver as time passes.

## How is Hepatitis B contracted

Hepatitis B can be contracted via blood, semen or vaginal fluids. The most common risk scenarios are unprotected sex and the use of intravenous drugs. Hepatitis B can be contracted from shared needles, syringes and other paraphernalia relating to the preparation and injection of drugs. Rinsing the syringe in the same bowl with other syringes or transferring substances from one syringe to another also poses a risk of infection. The virus can also be contracted from razor blades, toothbrushes and tattooing equipment, if there is blood on them. A mother with the virus may also infect her offspring during childbirth.

After the infection, the virus usually remains in the blood for approximately 1-6 months. During this time all those infected with the virus are at risk of infecting others. Of those who were infected as adults, approximately 5 % become permanent carriers of the virus and stand a risk of infecting others for the remainder of their lives. Half of all virus carriers do not exhibit any of the symptoms of acute Hepatitis B.

## How to protect yourself

When engaging in intercourse, use a condom throughout the entire sex act. If you use drugs intravenously, only use your own clean needles, syringes, filters and other equipment. Never make blood oaths. If you decide to get a tattoo, make sure it is applied with sterile equipment.

## Other points

There is a vaccination against Hepatitis B. It is available to users of intravenous drugs for free. Steady sex partners of Hepatitis B carriers can also receive the vaccination for free. The vaccination is available from your local health centre, and in Helsinki at the epidemiological unit of the Aurora hospital or at the A-Clinic location on Kettutie.

## Contact the following for more information:

- Health centres (see your local phone book for contact information)
- Polyclinics for venereal diseases (see your local phone book for contact information)
- [A-Clinics](#)
- Health Advice Centre Vinkki in Helsinki tel. 040 688 1000. Other health advice centres can be found [here](#)

## Pauli Karvonen

Physician at the Youth Centre of Helsinki

## References ►

"Hepatitis B and how to protect yourself from it", a Prevent-programme fact sheet by the A-Clinic Foundation.

Lappalainen M, Meurman O, Färkkilä M: Virushepatiittien ehkäisy, diagnostiikka ja hoito ("The prevention, diagnostics and treatment of viral hepatitis"). Duodecim 2000; 116 (1): 61-9.

Yleislääkärin käsikirja ja tietokanta ("Handbook and database of the general practitioner") 3/2000, Kustannus Oy Duodecim.

link

Source URL: <https://paihdelinkki.fi/en/info-bank/articles/substance-use-and-health/hepatitis-b-and-how-protect-yourself-it>