



**CITY OF PHILADELPHIA  
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
DIVISION OF DISEASE CONTROL**

## **HEPATITIS B (SERUM HEPATITIS)**

### **What is hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B (formerly known as serum hepatitis) is an infection of the liver caused by a bloodborne virus. The disease is fairly common. The rate of hepatitis B in Philadelphia has been approximately nine cases per 100,000 persons for the last three years (1998-2000).

### **Who gets hepatitis B?**

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

- injecting drug users who share needles;
- health care workers who have contact with infected blood;
- persons having sexual contact (vaginal, oral, or anal) with a person who is infected;
- homosexual or bisexual males, particularly those with multiple partners;
- people with multiple sexual partners;
- travelers to areas of the world where hepatitis B is endemic if they are staying for more than six months;
- people in custodial care (in settings such as developmental centers) or staff of these facilities;
- hemodialysis patients;
- certain household contacts of infected persons (especially if they share personal items, such as razors or toothbrushes); and
- infants born to mothers who are hepatitis B carriers.

## **How is hepatitis B 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 fatigue, poor appetite, fever, vomiting, diarrhea, 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 people experience few or no symptoms.

## **How soon after infection do symptoms appear?**

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

## **For how long is a person able to spread the hepatitis B 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 10 percent of infected people may become long-term carriers of the virus. Carriers may remain infectious with hepatitis B for years.

## **How is hepatitis B diagnosed?**

Hepatitis B is diagnosed by a positive blood test for hepatitis B viral antigen or antibody.

## **What is the treatment for hepatitis B?**

There are no special medicines or antibiotics that can be used to treat a person once the acute symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed. Chronic carriers of hepatitis B should seek consultation from a physician for medical follow-up.

## **What precautions should hepatitis B carriers take?**

Hepatitis B carriers should follow standard hygienic practices to ensure that close contacts are not directly contaminated by his or her blood or other body fluids. Carriers must not share razors, toothbrushes, or any other objects that could potentially 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.

## How can hepatitis B be prevented?

A vaccine to prevent Hepatitis B has been available for several years. The vaccine is given in three separate shots. (You must have all three to be protected.) It is safe, effective and is recommended for people in high-risk settings:

- injecting drug users who share needles;
- health care workers who have contact with infected blood;
- persons having sexual contact (vaginal, oral, or anal) with a person who is infected;
- homosexual or bisexual males, particularly those with multiple partners;
- people with multiple sexual partners;
- travelers to areas of the world where hepatitis B is endemic if they are staying for more than six months;
- people in custodial care (in settings such as developmental centers) or staff of these facilities;
- hemodialysis patients;
- certain household contacts of infected persons (especially if they share personal items, such as razors or toothbrushes); and
- infants born to mothers who are hepatitis B carriers.

It is also recommended that hepatitis B vaccine be universally administered to all children, along with their routine childhood immunizations beginning at birth or two months of age. A special hepatitis B immune globulin is also available for people who are exposed to the virus. In the event of exposure to hepatitis B, consult a doctor or the health department.