



**Louisiana Office of Public Health  
Infectious Disease Epidemiology  
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## Hepatitis B

### What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus. The disease is fairly common and can cause liver cell damage, leading to cirrhosis and cancer.

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis B?

The symptoms of hepatitis B include fatigue, 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.

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

### 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.
- Homosexual males, particularly those with multiple partners.
- People in custodial care (in settings such as developmental centers).
- Hemodialysis patients.
- Certain household contacts of infected persons.
- Infants born to infected mothers.
- Sexually active heterosexuals.

### Is hepatitis B common?

About one fourth of one percent have been infected in Louisiana. Most were infected when they were children and they were not sick.

### How is hepatitis B spread?

The hepatitis B virus is found in the blood, and to a lesser extent, saliva, semen, and other body fluids of an infected person. It is most commonly spread by infected mothers to newborn infants through blood exposure at birth, by sharing contaminated needles during intravenous drug use, through sexual intercourse, and through exposure of cuts or mucous membranes to contaminated blood. Hepatitis B is not spread by casual contact. The virus can be found in the blood and other body fluids several weeks before symptoms appear and generally persist for several months afterward.

Approximately 10 percent of infected people may become long-term carriers of the virus.

### What is the treatment for hepatitis B?

There are no special medicines that can be used to treat a person once the symptoms appear. Generally, bed rest is all that is needed. Interferon and some anti-viral drugs are effective to treat those with chronic liver disease.

### How can hepatitis B be prevented?

A vaccine to prevent hepatitis B has been available for several years. The three-dose vaccine can be given at any age. In most states the vaccine is now being given to infants along with their other childhood vaccinations. Some schools are requiring the hepatitis B vaccine for all students. There is no need for children with hepatitis B to be excluded from school or day care. Some other preventative measures include practicing safe sex, cleaning up blood with bleach while wearing protective gloves, and not sharing toothbrushes or razors.

### What precautions should hepatitis B carriers take?

Hepatitis B carriers should follow standard hygienic practices to ensure that close contacts are not directly contaminated with their blood or other body fluids. Carriers must not share razors, toothbrushes or any other object that may be contaminated with blood, and should practice safe sex. In addition, household members, particularly sexual contacts should be immunized with hepatitis B vaccine.

Avoid drinking alcohol in excess

Avoid eating raw shellfish in case of chronic liver disease

### Is there a vaccine available?

A vaccine is available. The vaccine is part of the routine immunizations schedule for children. It is recommended also for adolescents who were not previously immunized and for high risk adults:

- Ethnic populations at high risk of HBV infection
- Sexually Active Heterosexual Adolescents and Adults.
- Household Contacts and Sexual Partners of People With Chronic HBV Infection.
- Health Care Professionals and Others With Occupational Exposure to Blood.
- Residents and Staff of Institutions for People With Developmental Disabilities.
- Patients Undergoing Hemodialysis.
- Patients With Bleeding Disorders Who Receive Clotting Factor Concentrates.
- International Travelers.

Adapted from the Centers for Disease Control web page  
[www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)