

Hepatitis B

Could I be at risk?



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What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that can damage the liver. It can cause acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term) illness. There is a vaccine which protects against hepatitis B and you should get this vaccine if you are at risk of catching the disease.

How could I get hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is carried in the blood and other body fluids of an infected person. It can be passed to another person when there is contact with even very tiny amounts of blood. You can't catch it through every day contact such as shaking hands, hugging or kissing, or through sharing toilets, crockery or kitchen utensils after normal cleaning.

Acute hepatitis B

Acute infection may cause a flu-like illness which is mild enough that people do not know they are infected with hepatitis B. Some people will have a more severe illness with jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) and will be aware they are infected. The blood of people with acute hepatitis B is very infectious. Adults will usually clear acute infection without long-lasting problems.

Most cases of acute infection in the UK, Europe and North America are sexually acquired, especially if a condom is not used. Men who have sex with men, men or women with multiple sex partners, people who have sex with new partners in higher risk countries, and sex workers, are most at risk.

Other ways of coming into contact with the virus include:

- sharing equipment for injecting drugs;
- when unsterile equipment for tattooing, piercing or acupuncture, or medical or dental treatment, is used (this is much more of a risk outside the UK);
- sharing toothbrushes, razors and other personal items;
- receiving blood or blood products. All blood is now screened in the UK but in countries where blood is not screened, this may still be a cause of infection.

Chronic hepatitis B

If the body does not clear the acute infection, the disease may become chronic and cause long-term liver damage. This is particularly likely to happen if hepatitis B is caught in childhood. People with chronic hepatitis B are still infectious.

Most people in Northern Ireland with chronic hepatitis B have lived in a country where hepatitis B is common (including Asian, African, South American and some Eastern European countries), but some will have caught acute infection in the UK and not cleared it.

Ways of catching hepatitis B in countries where the virus is common include:

- around the time of birth, when the mother has chronic hepatitis B (this is the most frequent way);

- during childhood, with blood contact during minor injuries or in households eg sharing toothbrushes;
- through any procedure using unsterile equipment such as tattooing, piercing, acupuncture, or medical and dental procedures.

Also any of the risks listed for acute hepatitis B.

How do I know if I have the virus?

If you think you could have been in contact with hepatitis B in the past, you can have a simple blood test. Your GP can do this. All pregnant women are offered a test as well so the baby can be protected with vaccination at birth if the mother has hepatitis B.

If you are concerned about sexually-transmitted infection, including hepatitis B, you can get advice, vaccination and testing at a genitourinary medicine clinic.

If you are at risk of catching hepatitis B, you may want to consider whether you should be tested for other viruses such as hepatitis C and HIV as well.

What if the test is negative?

This probably means you have not been in contact with the hepatitis B virus. However, it can take up

to six months for the body to react to the virus, so if you have been at risk you may need another test. If you are still at risk of catching hepatitis B, you should be vaccinated.

What if the test is positive?

The doctor looking after you will tell you what you need to do. They may send you to see a specialist and you may need treatment which can help keep you healthy. If you drink alcohol, you should limit, or, better still, cut out, alcohol. You should avoid passing on the infection by following the steps below.

How can I avoid getting hepatitis B or passing on the virus if I have it already?

- If you have been at risk, get tested and if you are still at risk, get vaccinated.
- Never share toothbrushes, razors, earrings or other equipment that can come into contact with blood or body fluids like scissors or tweezers.
- Practise safer sex – limit the number of partners you have, make sure any partner is vaccinated and use a condom.

- Check all equipment used for tattoos, piercing or acupuncture is sterile and be especially cautious if considering these procedures abroad.
- If you inject drugs, never share equipment.

Information and support

If you have any questions, you can talk to your GP or nurse.

Sexual health/Genitourinary Medicine (GUM) clinics provide confidential advice. Visit:

www.sexualhealthni.info/gum-clinics-northern-ireland for the times and contact details of your local sexual health/GUM clinic.

The Northern Ireland Hepatitis B and C Managed Clinical Network provides information on hepatitis B and C www.hepbandcni.net

The RVH Liver Support Group offers support to those in Northern Ireland living with liver disease and is an independent group affiliated to the British Liver Trust www.rvhliversupportgroup.org

The British Liver Trust provides information on all forms of liver disease. Helpline: 0800 652 7330 (9.00am–5.00pm, Mon-Fri) www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

This leaflet is also available as PDF files in other languages from:

www.publichealth.hscni.net

and www.hepbandcni.net



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