

# FACTSHEET

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## Hepatitis B virus infection in infants and children

### What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. In children the inflammation is usually caused by a viral infection but there are other causes. Hepatitis B is one virus which can cause hepatitis.

### What does hepatitis B infection do?

Acute hepatitis B infection usually does not cause any symptoms in children. Infected adults however often feel extremely tired and unwell. Adults with hepatitis B often have a loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting, and their skin and eyes may go yellow (jaundice).

If the hepatitis B virus stays in the blood stream and liver of a child for longer than six months, this is known as chronic hepatitis B infection. While most adults are able to get rid of hepatitis B virus from their body after infection, young children often do not clear the virus from their body and so have chronic hepatitis B.

Most children with chronic hepatitis B infection are well, normal healthy children.

### How do people catch hepatitis B infection?

The hepatitis B virus is found in the blood and body fluids (saliva, breast-milk, semen, vaginal secretions) of people with hepatitis B. The most common way that children are infected with the virus is when a pregnant woman, who has hepatitis B, passes the virus on to her baby during pregnancy or birth.

Adults can become infected from very close personal contact, such as having sex with, or sharing a needle with a person who has hepatitis B.

### Can hepatitis B virus infection be prevented?

**Immunisations** at any age (from babies to old age) protect people against infections. If a pregnant woman has hepatitis B, her baby can be immunised (given a vaccine) at birth to protect the baby from becoming infected with the hepatitis B virus. This immunisation involves the baby being given a dose of hepatitis B immunoglobulin and a dose of hepatitis B vaccine. These two injections should be given the day the baby is born. The baby should go on to receive all of the vaccinations on the Australian Immunisation Schedule, including 4 doses in total of the hepatitis B vaccine.

All babies born to a mother with hepatitis B, should be tested for hepatitis B 3 months after the final hepatitis B vaccination is given (this is around 9 months of age if the infant vaccine schedule was given on time at 6 months of age).

It is important to understand that immunisation cannot cure someone who is already infected with the hepatitis B virus. If a child is found to have hepatitis B, the family should be tested and immunised if not previously infected or immunised.

Children with hepatitis B should be immunised against the hepatitis A virus also.

If your child does have hepatitis B, you and your family should practise **blood awareness**. This means being careful around your child's blood (e.g. from a wound or a

bite) and knowing how to deal with it. Your child should not share things like toothbrushes and razors with others. Disposable gloves should be worn when cleaning up any blood or bodily fluids. When cleaning spills, remove as much as possible with paper towels, then clean the area with detergent and cold water. Larger spills can be cleaned with bleach.

### **Do I have to tell the school/day care that my child has hepatitis B?**

You are NOT required by law to inform schools and day care that your child has hepatitis B. Schools and day care should always practise standard precautions when dealing with blood and body fluids from any child in their care. This means that they should treat every child's secretions as if they were infectious.

### **What happens next?**

Most children with hepatitis B remain well in childhood and adolescence. Up to a quarter of people with hepatitis B can develop chronic liver disease and a small number may develop liver cancer. Some people can get rid of the virus on their own without treatment.

### **Can children with hepatitis B be treated?**

There is medical treatment for some people with hepatitis B. This is mostly given to adults. Children are not usually treated however if there is a medical need to treat children, either a course of injections or oral medication may be given under the supervision of your child's specialist.

Children with chronic hepatitis B should lead a normal healthy lifestyle that includes a healthy diet and some exercise. This will help to keep their liver healthy. Adolescents should avoid drinking alcohol and taking drugs.

### **Who can I speak to if I want to know more about hepatitis B?**

The hospital experts are the Gastroenterology team and the Infectious disease team. Most of the experts on immunisation against hepatitis B work at the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS).

Call your hospital's switchboard number and ask to speak to either the Gastroenterology or Infectious disease team on:

- The Children's Hospital at Westmead: (02) 9845 0000
- The Sydney Children's Hospital, Randwick: (02) 9382-1111
- John Hunter Children's Hospital: (02) 49 213000

### **Further Information**

National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance of Vaccine Preventable Diseases

029845 1433

[www.ncirs.edu.au](http://www.ncirs.edu.au)

### **Remember:**

- Immunisation can prevent hepatitis B infection.
- If your child has hepatitis B, be careful around their blood.