

Hepatitis B

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis is a general word for an inflamed liver. It has many causes including viral infections, medications and alcohol. Hepatitis B is a virus that can infect and cause damage to the liver.

What does my liver do?

Your liver is an important organ. It is responsible for:

- storing vitamins, minerals, iron and sugars;
- breaking down food;
- making essential proteins;
- breaking down harmful chemicals.

How can I catch Hepatitis B?

From close contact with someone who has the infection.

In the UK (where Hepatitis B is relatively rare), infection is most commonly caught as an adult through sex with someone who has the infection, or through sharing needles or injecting equipment. In areas where Hepatitis B is very common (such as Asia and Africa), many people are infected when they are children.

Will I be infected for life?

The majority of healthy adults who catch Hepatitis B will clear the virus completely within six months of catching it. However some adults and most children will go on to develop chronic hepatitis and will be infected for the rest of their lives.

Is Hepatitis B serious?

Hepatitis B can be serious. For most people the acute infection is not serious (and some people will not remember any symptoms). However, chronic infection can lead to serious complications after many years including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver failure and liver cancer.

Is Hepatitis B easy to diagnose?

Yes. A simple blood tests can show whether you have Hepatitis B, whether you have previously cleared the infection and whether you are immune to infection. Blood tests are also used to monitor response to Hepatitis B vaccination.

How can I prevent Hepatitis B?

An effective vaccination is available against Hepatitis B. This consists of a course of three or four vaccinations given over several weeks or months. It is important that you receive all vaccinations to give yourself the best chance of becoming immune to the virus.

The injections are usually given into the muscle of your upper arm. They are slightly uncomfortable at the time and some people have a sore arm for some hours after the injection. Other side-effects are very uncommon.

How effective is the vaccination?

The majority of adults will be immune to Hepatitis B after receiving all doses of the vaccine. We offer a blood test eight weeks after your final injection to check if you have responded to the course.

If this shows that you have not responded well, you will be offered either a booster vaccination or to repeat the course.

A small number of people do not respond to the vaccine even after a repeat course. Even more rarely the virus can sometimes infect people despite a good response to the vaccination, so it is important to take general precautions to prevent infection such as:

- safer sex (including using condoms for vaginal, anal and oral sex);
- never share needles or any other injecting equipment;
- never share toothbrushes or razors.

Who should be vaccinated?

- Anyone who has a sexual partner with Hepatitis B.
- All homosexual or bisexual men.
- People with sexual partners from areas where Hepatitis B is common (Asia, Africa, Central and South America).
- People who inject drugs and their sexual partners.
- Sex workers (prostitutes) and their clients.
- People with HIV and Hepatitis C.
- Patients who have been sexually assaulted.

The vaccine can be given to anyone in the above groups at Sexual Health Dorset, free of charge.

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Produced: Oct-20
Version: L034\v1\Oct-20

Review Date: Oct-23

Website: <https://sexualhealthdorset.org/>

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