



NL Health Services

Infection Prevention and Control

FACT SHEET

Hepatitis B



What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B (Hep B) is an infection of the liver caused by the Hepatitis B virus (HBV). This virus is found in the blood; it is contagious but can be prevented by a vaccine.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis B?

After the virus enters the body, it can take 2-6 months to develop signs of the illness. About half of the individuals infected will not have any symptoms which is why it is important to take precautions. Symptoms of Hep B include:

- Jaundice (yellowing of skin/eyes)
- Joint pain
- Loss of appetite
- Dark urine
- Pain in the stomach area
- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Pale stools

How is Hepatitis B spread?

- Hep B is highly infectious. It is found in the blood and body fluid (semen, vaginal fluid, and saliva) of infected individuals.
- It is most commonly spread through:
 - Unprotected sex.
 - Sharing contaminated needles or drug supplies.
 - Sharing of personal items such as razors.
 - Contaminated tattoo ink and piercing needles.
 - From an infected mother to the newborn at birth.

How to prevent the spread of Hepatitis B?

- There is a safe and effective vaccine available in Canada and it is the best way to prevent the disease.
- Immunization programs in Canada are free for children and certain groups of adults.
- If pregnant, you should know your status to decrease the risk of transmission during birth.
- Do not share needles or other drug supplies.
- Do not share personal items such as razors, nail clippers, or toothbrushes.
- Practice safe sex.
- Take appropriate precautions when in contact with blood or other bodily fluids that may contain the virus.
- Be careful when travelling because Hep B can be widespread in other countries.



Acute vs. Chronic Hepatitis B

Acute Hep B Infection:

- Symptoms may be non-specific or may not occur at all.
- Occurs when you have been exposed to the virus.
- 90% of individuals will clear the virus on their own within 6 months of being infected and will have developed lifelong protection.

Chronic Hep B Infection:

- 10% of infected individuals with HBV will become chronic carriers of Hep B.
- They may not show signs and symptoms of infection but still pose a risk for transmission.
- They are at risk of developing serious health complications such as scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) or liver cancer, if left untreated.
- Not everyone with chronic Hep B will need treatment; this decision is made in consultation with your health care provider.
- If treatment is started, then you will require close monitoring by your health care provider.