

Prevent hepatitis B infection

Hepatitis B is a serious liver disease with no cure caused by the **hepatitis B virus** (HBV).

Although it can cause no symptoms or mild symptoms, such as loss of appetite and nausea, it can cause serious disease, such as lifelong infection, **cirrhosis** (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure, and death.

The best defense against HBV is to prevent the transmission of the virus in the first place. The U.S. government has issued recommendations to

vaccinate all infants against HBV with 3 shots starting as early as birth. A study in the November 10, 1999, issue of *JAMA* shows that one such effort to vaccinate inner-city public housing children from 1991 to 1997 has had positive results. The HBV vaccine was administered at rates similar to those of other vaccines. Immunization with HBV was also associated with the newborns receiving other necessary vaccines in a timely manner.

TO PREVENT HEPATITIS B:

- Use condoms during sex if you or your partner is infected with HBV.
- If your sexual partner has hepatitis B, you should get tested and then vaccinated if not already infected.
- If you are living with an HBV-infected person, you should see your doctor for testing and vaccination for hepatitis B.
- If you are pregnant, you should be screened for HBV infection; your baby should be started on hepatitis B shots within a few hours of birth if you are infected or if you are uncertain of your status.
- Avoid the blood or other body fluids of people infected with HBV.



IF YOU HAVE HEPATITIS B:

DO's

- Do wash your hands well after touching your blood or other body fluids.
- Do throw away personal items such as tissues, menstrual pads, and tampons in a paper bag.
- Do cover all open cuts and sores.
- Do see your doctor every 6 months to one year to be checked for liver abnormalities and receive ongoing education about hepatitis B.

DO NOT'S

- Do not share chewing gum, toothbrushes, razors, washcloths, or anything that may have come in contact with your blood or other body fluids.
- Do not pre-chew food for babies.
- Do not donate blood, plasma, body organs, tissue, or sperm.
- Do not share syringes and needles.

Source: The Hepatitis B Coalition

Additional Sources: National Center for Infectious Diseases

Mi Young Hwang, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

The JAMA Patient Page is a public service of JAMA and the AMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances; but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, JAMA and the AMA suggest that you consult your physician. This page may be reproduced noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other reproduction is subject to AMA approval. To purchase bulk reprints, call 212/354-0050.

TRANSMISSION:

HBV is transmitted through direct contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected person, or from an infected mother to her newborn child.

IS THE VACCINE SAFE?

The vaccine is strongly endorsed by the medical, scientific, and public health communities as a safe and effective way to prevent disease and death. One recent concern about the vaccine involves the small amount of mercury contained in **thimerosal** (a preservative contained in the vaccine) and the possible risk it may pose to newborns who are vaccinated for HBV. There are new vaccines available that do not contain thimerosal. Also, scientific data have shown that the vaccine is very safe and not associated with multiple sclerosis, AIDS, or chronic illnesses. The vaccine is recommended as part of the routine vaccinations for children by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Academy of Family Physicians.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Hepatitis Branch
888/4-HEP-CDC or
www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hepatitis/index.htm
- American Liver Foundation
888/4-HEP-ABC or
www.liverfoundation.org
- The Hepatitis B Coalition
651/647-9009 or
www.immunize.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. A previous *JAMA* Patient Page on hepatitis C was published on December 23/30, 1998.

