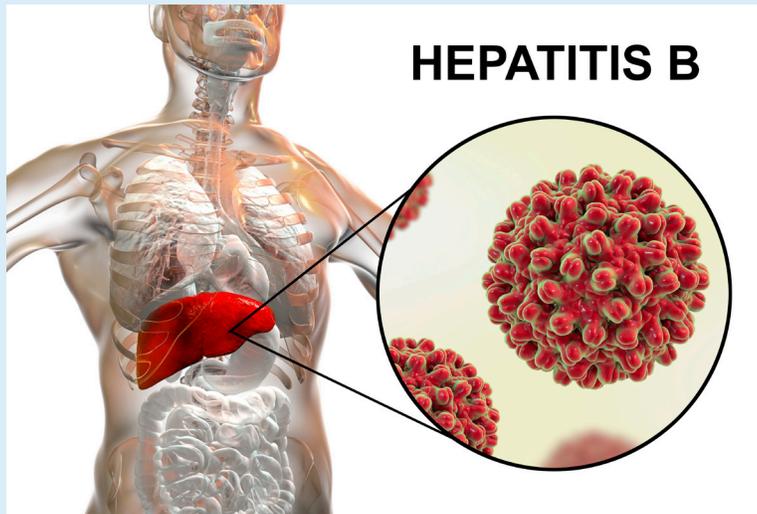


Hepatitis B: Why Testing and Treatment Are Important

How to Know if You Have Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a serious liver infection that's caused by the hepatitis B virus. You can get infected if you come into contact with body fluids -- blood, saliva, semen, vaginal fluids -- of someone who's already infected. The most common ways to get hepatitis B include sex, intravenous (IV) drug use, accidental needle sticks, and from mother to child during childbirth. Hepatitis B isn't spread through casual contact. However, the virus can live outside the body for at least 7 days and can cause infection during this time.



If you get infected with hepatitis B, your immune system -- the body's defense system -- can try to fight it off. But some adults, as well as babies and children, aren't able to clear the virus from their bodies. If infection doesn't go away in about 6 months, it means that hepatitis B has become long term (chronic) or lifelong.

You can't tell on your own if you have hepatitis B. Most people who become infected don't feel sick or have any symptoms. But they can still spread the virus to others. If you're pregnant and have hepatitis B, you can infect your baby during birth. If your baby gets infected and isn't treated, he or she could have long-term liver problems. The only way to know for sure if you have hepatitis B is with a blood test your doctor can do.

How Hepatitis B Affects Your Body

Hepatitis B can cause serious damage to your liver and scarring known as cirrhosis. This can lead to liver failure -- where your liver stops working properly -- and liver cancer. Hepatitis B can also cause blood vessel problems, kidney disease, and even death if it's not treated.

Once the hepatitis B virus enters your body, your immune system is triggered to fight off infection. It does this by making antibodies that attack the virus. Damage to your liver, kidneys, and blood vessels by the hepatitis B virus can happen during this immune response. Even as your liver becomes very damaged, symptoms might not show up, so getting tested for hepatitis B is important.

Treating Hepatitis B

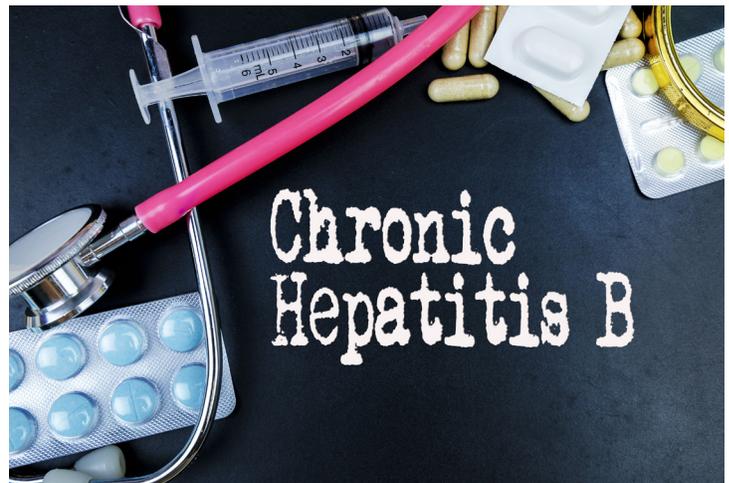
There's no cure for hepatitis B, but there is treatment. Treatment helps lower your risk of liver disease and can even save your life. It also helps prevent you from passing the infection to other people.

If you think you've been exposed to hepatitis B, contact your doctor right away. You may be able to get a shot of hepatitis B immune globulin. This boosts your immune system to help fight off infection. The earlier you get treatment, the better. But this only gives short-term protection so your doctor may also recommend a vaccine against hepatitis B, if you haven't had one before.

If you have chronic hepatitis B, your doctor may prescribe medicine to treat it, such as:

- **Antiviral medicines** to help fight the virus and slow its ability to damage your liver
- **Interferon injections** to help your body fight infection

Your doctor may recommend a liver transplant if your liver has been severely damaged.



Tips to Help With Your Hepatitis B

You and your doctor can create a plan to manage your hepatitis B that includes treatment that is right for you. Also, maintaining a healthy lifestyle can help you manage your overall health and your liver health.

Ways to do this include:

- Make and keep appointments with your doctor so they can monitor your hepatitis B regularly
- Take medicines as directed and tell your doctor or pharmacist about any side effects
- Avoid alcohol -- it can cause additional liver damage
- Quit smoking
- Eat a healthy diet
- Check with your doctor before taking any medicines -- even those you get without a prescription -- and nutritional or herbal supplements. These may also damage your liver
- Ask your doctor about other tests or vaccinations you should have