

HEPATITIS B VACCINE INFORMATION SHEET

Main points

- Hepatitis B is caused by a virus spread mainly by blood, sexual contact or from mother to newborn baby;
- It causes acute hepatitis (liver infection) or a chronic infection which leads to cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver or liver cancer;
- About 1 in 4 people with chronic hepatitis B will develop cirrhosis or liver cancer;
- About 1 in 20 people who receive the vaccine has local swelling, redness or pain at the injection site;
- About 1 in 50 people who receive the vaccine has a fever;
- Serious reactions are very rare.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that attacks the liver. It can cause serious disease including permanent liver damage (cirrhosis). Hepatitis B is also the main cause of liver cancer, which can be fatal. Hepatitis B virus is spread from one infected person to another by contact with blood or body fluids. This includes an accidental or intentional poke with a used needle, intimate sexual contact, being splashed in the mouth, nose, or eyes with infected blood, being bitten by an infected person, or by sharing blood-contaminated items such as a toothbrush, dental floss or razor.

Mothers who are infected with hepatitis B virus can pass the virus to their newborn babies during delivery. When infants are infected with hepatitis B virus, they often do not have symptoms but most will stay infected for life. This is why it is important to protect children by getting them immunised at birth.

After the virus enters your body, it usually takes 2 to 3 months to develop symptoms or signs of illness. Many people who get hepatitis B show no symptoms and may not know they have the disease. Whether there are signs of illness or not, you can pass the virus on to others.

Who should get the hepatitis B vaccine?

The hepatitis B vaccine is recommended and funded for:

- Babies at birth (with further doses at 6 weeks, 4 months and 6 months in combination with other vaccines);
- Adolescents aged 13-14 years who did not receive hepatitis B vaccination as an infant;
- Household and sexual contacts of people with hepatitis B;
- Injecting drug users;
- People with chronic liver disease;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and
- Children born in countries with high rates of hepatitis B.

Vaccination is also recommended, but not funded, for:

- People with HIV or impaired immunity;
- Residents and staff of facilities for people with intellectual disabilities;
- Inmates and staff of long-term correctional facilities;
- Healthcare workers including ambulance personnel and dentists;
- People travelling to countries where hepatitis B is common;
- Police, emergency services staff, members of the armed forces if assigned to duties which may involve exposure; and
- Others at risk including embalmers, tattooists, body piercers and sex industry workers.

Adults and those 16 years of age and older require 3 doses of the vaccine.

What are the benefits of getting the hepatitis B vaccine?

The hepatitis B vaccine is highly effective. It protects against hepatitis B infection and its complications such as permanent liver damage, which can lead to liver cancer and death.

When you get immunised, you help protect others as well.

What are possible reactions after the vaccine?

Vaccines are very safe. It is much safer to get the vaccine than to get hepatitis B.

Common reactions to the vaccine may include soreness, redness and swelling where the shot was given. Some people may experience a mild fever.

It is important to stay in the clinic for 15 minutes after getting any vaccine because there is an extremely rare possibility of a life-threatening allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. This may include hives, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat, tongue or lips. If this happens after you leave the clinic, call 000. This reaction can be treated, and it occurs in less than 1 in a million people who get the vaccine.

Always report serious or unexpected reactions to VaxWorks Health Services on 1300 34 84 22 or to your GP.

Who should not get the hepatitis B vaccine?

Speak with clinic staff if you if you have had a life-threatening reaction to a previous dose of hepatitis B vaccine, or any component of the vaccine, such as yeast, or to latex.

Hepatitis B vaccine is not routinely given to pregnant women.

There is no need to delay getting immunised because of a cold or other mild illness. However, if you have concerns, speak with the clinic staff.