

# INFORMATION ABOUT HEPATITIS B



## **What is hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B is an infection caused by a virus (hepatitis B virus) that can damage the liver.

Some people can have hepatitis B infection without ever having any symptoms. Others notice a short 'flu-like' illness which may include tiredness, aches and pains, nausea and loss of appetite. More serious symptoms such as vomiting, abdominal pain and yellowing of the skin or eyes (jaundice) can also occur.

These symptoms usually get better within a few weeks, and most adults who get hepatitis B recover fully from it within six months. Their immune system clears (gets rid of) the infection and they then remain immune to it for life, with no lasting consequences of the infection.

However some people (especially those who get hepatitis B when they are very young) don't manage to clear the infection within six months and instead develop longer-lasting or permanent hepatitis B infection (chronic hepatitis B). A few of these people can develop long-term health problems due to ongoing hepatitis B infection, including liver damage and liver cancer.

## **How do you catch hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B virus is present in an infected person's blood and can also be present in other secretions such as saliva, semen and vaginal fluid.

In Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom (and also in Europe and North America) hepatitis B is mainly passed from one person to another through unprotected sex (sex without a condom) with an infected person.

Hepatitis B can also spread from one person to another if an infected person's blood or body fluid gets in through an open wound, cut or scratch, or from a contaminated needle.

In some parts of the world, the main route of transmission is when babies are born to infected mothers, but this is rare in Scotland.

There is no risk of infection from ordinary social contact between people (such as shaking hands or having a conversation with them). You cannot catch hepatitis B from a toilet seat or just by touching an infected person. No special precautions are needed when handling crockery and cutlery used by someone with Hepatitis B (they can be washed up in hot soapy water or a dishwasher in the normal way).

## **Treatment**

Most people who get hepatitis B do not need treatment. They may feel more tired than usual and need rest, but they then recover without treatment.

However people who remain infected for longer than six months may benefit from treatment. They need to be regularly monitored by a specialist in liver diseases to detect whether liver damage is occurring and whether treatment is necessary. Several antiviral drugs are currently being used for treatment.

### **How a person with hepatitis B can reduce the risk of infecting others**

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis B you should do the following things to reduce the risk of infecting others:

- Carefully clean and cover any cuts, scratches and open wounds with a waterproof plaster.
- Clean up any blood spillages from floors or other surfaces using household bleach, and carefully dispose of any items that may be contaminated with your blood (such as used dressings or tampons).
- Avoid sharing items such as razors, toothbrushes or injecting equipment with other people.
- Encourage the people who live in the same household as you to get tested for and vaccinated against hepatitis B.
- If having sex, practice safer sex and use condoms for all vaginal, anal or oral sex. Encourage your sexual partner(s) to get tested for and vaccinated against hepatitis B.
- Do not donate blood or semen or register to donate organs.

If you have hepatitis B, you should be under the care of a specialist hepatitis B doctor. If you are not already being looked after by a specialist, ask your GP to refer you to one.

### **Sexual partners and household members**

If you live in the same household with a person who has hepatitis B or are a sexual partner of a person who has hepatitis B, you should be tested for and vaccinated against hepatitis B.

If you are a sexual partner of a person with hepatitis B you should practice safer sex with all of your sexual partners and use condoms for all vaginal, anal and oral sex, at least until you have had a full course of three doses of hepatitis B vaccine and have been tested for hepatitis B.

### **Things that everyone can do to prevent hepatitis B transmission**

- People who may have had an exposure to hepatitis B or to other blood-borne viruses or sexually-transmitted infections (such as HIV, gonorrhoea, and chlamydia) should be tested.
- People who are at increased risk of hepatitis B infection (for example people who inject drugs, change sexual partners frequently or who are close contacts of a person with hepatitis B) should get vaccinated against hepatitis B.
- Avoid sharing items such as razors or toothbrushes with other people.
- Use condoms whenever you have sex.
- If you use drugs, avoid sharing needles or any other equipment used to inject, inhale or snort drugs.
- Consider the risks of tattooing or body piercing and other alternative therapies that may involve the use of sharp instruments or bloodletting (since not all practitioners of these procedures follow good infection control practices).

### **How do I get tested for and vaccinated against hepatitis B?**

You can access hepatitis B testing and vaccination via your GP or (if you wish to also access other sexual health services) via the Sandyford sexual health service.

If you are not already registered with a GP, information about how to do that can be found here: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/care-support-and-rights/nhs-services/doctors/registering-with-a-gp-practice>



You can make an appointment at the Sandyford sexual health service by phoning 0141 211 8130 or online via <https://www.sandyford.scot/>



### **How can I access free condoms?**

Information about accessing free condoms in Greater Glasgow and Clyde can be found at <https://www.freecondoms.scot/>



### **How can I access safe and hygienic injecting equipment and other drug services?**

Information about Injecting Equipment Provision (IEP) services in Greater Glasgow and Clyde and elsewhere in Scotland can be found at <https://www.needleexchange.scot/>



Information about other services for people who use drugs in Greater Glasgow and Clyde can be accessed here: <https://www.nhsggc.scot/your-health/right-care-right-place/addictions/>



You can also access a specialist clinic for people who use image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs) here: <https://www.scottishdrugservices.com/Home/Details/197>



### **Sources of further information on hepatitis B**

NHS Inform (<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/stomach-liver-and-gastrointestinal-tract/hepatitis-b>)



Hepatitis Scotland (<https://www.hepatitisscotland.org.uk/hepatitis-b>)

