

HEPATITIS B Factsheet

for people from diverse cultural backgrounds

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What is hepatitis B and how common is it?

Hepatitis B is a virus which causes inflammation of the liver. Globally, 30% of the world's population has been infected with the virus. Most adults are able to fight off hepatitis B infection and develop immunity which protects them from future hepatitis B infection. Unfortunately, most babies and children who contract hepatitis B go on to develop chronic (life-long) hepatitis B infection:

- **Globally:** 400 million people have chronic hepatitis B – it is very common in South East and North East Asia, and in parts of Africa
- **In Australia:** 165,000 people are living with chronic hepatitis B – most are people who were born in the Asia-Pacific region, or in rural and remote Indigenous communities.

Is there a vaccination?

Yes. Hepatitis B can be prevented through a safe and effective vaccination. **A vaccination is all it takes to protect you and your family against hepatitis B:**

- Free hepatitis B vaccinations are offered to all babies born in Australia, and to children at school aged between 10-13 years
- Other people can get vaccinations from GPs and some clinics.

How do you get hepatitis B?

In regions with high rates of hepatitis B and low vaccination rates, hepatitis B is commonly passed on from mother-to-baby at birth, or between infected family members and children in the home. Since the introduction of ante-natal screening and vaccination programs in Australia, mother-to-baby transmission is uncommon. Most new infections in Australia occur in unvaccinated adults infected through unprotected sexual contact, or unsterile drug injecting equipment. Hepatitis B is not passed on through casual contact such as hugging, shaking hands, or sharing food or cutlery.

How will I know if I have chronic hepatitis B?

You may have hepatitis B and not know it. The only way to know if you have hepatitis B is to get tested. Testing involves a simple blood test:

- People with chronic hepatitis B often feel well for many years until they develop more advanced liver disease
- It is estimated that around one in every three people living with chronic hepatitis B in Australia does not know they are infected
- Symptoms of liver disease may be felt when the disease is more advanced. These include tiredness, abdominal pain, nausea and loss of appetite.

To speak to somebody about hepatitis B
call **1300 437 222 (1300 HEP ABC)**

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If you have chronic hepatitis B - how serious is it?

Chronic hepatitis B is a slowly progressing, but very serious disease:

- **If left untreated, hepatitis B can cause serious liver disease and liver cancer**
- Around the world, one million people die from complications of hepatitis B each year.

Is there an effective treatment?

Hepatitis B can be managed and treated:

- Like diabetes, the aim of hepatitis B treatment and management is to keep the virus under control rather than provide a cure
- Regular blood tests are essential to assess the need for treatment
- At certain stages of the disease, people with chronic hepatitis B benefit from treatment to lower the amount of virus in the body, and reduce the chance of getting cirrhosis (liver scarring) or liver cancer
- People with a Medicare card can access government-funded treatment.

What can people with chronic hepatitis B do to look after their liver health?

- Stay in contact with your liver specialist or GP and have regular tests even if you feel well
- Talk to your doctor before taking any complementary medicines, as some are very harmful to the liver
- Maintain a normal body weight and a healthy diet
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco.

For more information about viral hepatitis visit www.hepatitisaustralia.com or call **1300 437 222** if you require an interpreter call 131 450

To speak to somebody about hepatitis C
call **1300 437 222 (1300 HEP ABC)**

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