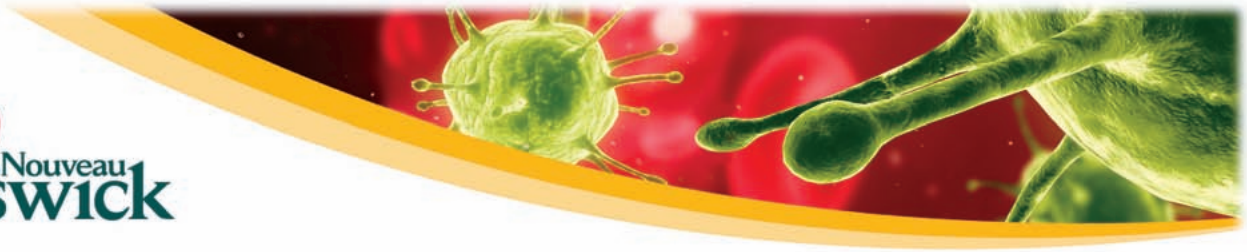

Hepatitis B

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a contagious, blood-borne and sexually-transmitted infection caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). The virus attacks the liver and can cause both acute and chronic disease. Most healthy adults are able to fight the infection and clear the virus within 6 months. For others, the infection leads to a "chronic" or lifelong illness causing serious health problems such as liver cirrhosis or cancer. Young children infected with HBV are the most likely to develop chronic infections.

What are the symptoms?

More than half of the people who get the virus will have no symptoms and do not know they are infected. Symptoms usually appear 2 to 3 months after exposure to the virus. During this period of acute infection, people can have symptoms such as, jaundice (skin and eyes turn yellow), fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, dark urine, joint pain and pain in the stomach area. It is important to note that you can pass the virus on to others even if you have no symptoms.

How is hepatitis B spread?

HBV virus is highly infectious. It is usually spread when blood, semen or other body fluids of an infected person enter the body of someone else. HBV is most commonly spread through:

- sharing needles, syringes and other drug use equipment;
- unprotected sexual contact with an infected person;
- sharing personal care articles such as razors, nail clippers or toothbrush with an infected person;
- from an infected mother to a newborn infant at the time of birth.

Hepatitis B is not spread through breastfeeding, sharing eating utensils, sneezing, coughing or holding hands.

How is Hepatitis B diagnosed?

Most people who get the virus do not know they are infected. If you think you are at risk for HBV or if you are pregnant, you should get tested. A blood test will determine if you have been exposed to the virus.

How is Hepatitis B treated?

Any patient known to have hepatitis B should be referred to a healthcare provider for further assessment and treatment.

To reduce the risk of further damage to the liver, people with hepatitis B should:

- Be immunized against hepatitis A
- Minimize alcohol intake
- Check with a health care professional before taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs.

Who is at risk of Hepatitis B infections?

Anyone can get hepatitis B, but you are at greater risk if you:

- have unprotected sex with someone infected with hepatitis B;
- have multiple drug use and/ or sex partners;
- live in the same house with someone who has hepatitis B;
- are an infant born to a mother infected with hepatitis B;
- are born to an immigrant or adopted from an area where hepatitis B is widespread;
- share needles and other drug use equipment;
- are a man having sex with men;
- are a healthcare worker exposed to blood and body fluids;
- are a haemodialysis patient.

How can Hepatitis B be prevented?

The best way to prevent hepatitis B is to get vaccinated.

The following precautions may also help you to avoid HBV infection and other STBBI:

- Practice safer sex. Use condoms and/or dental dams when having vaginal, oral and anal sex;
- Never share needles or other drug related material or equipment;
- Be cautious about body piercings, tattoos and acupuncture. Make sure single-use, disposable needles are used and that all other equipment is disinfected and sterile;
- Don't share personal items like nail clippers, razors, or toothbrushes;
- If you are likely to be in contact with blood or other bodily fluids in your work take appropriate precautions, such as wearing latex gloves.

If you have hepatitis B:

- Do not donate blood, semen, tissue or organs unless recommended otherwise.
- Be very careful to make sure that other people are not exposed to your blood.
- Cover any wounds with a waterproof bandage.
- Clean up any blood spills with a paper towel and clean thoroughly with detergent and water until no obvious stains are left. Large spills on carpet may need to be shampooed or steam cleaned.

What is the public health response?

Anyone known to or suspected to be infected by the hepatitis B virus must be reported to Public Health by their healthcare provider.

If you are diagnosed with hepatitis B, your health-care provider will treat you and give you information on sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI).

A Public Health nurse may contact you to make sure that your partners have been tested and referred for appropriate care and to provide you with tips on how to prevent the spread of hepatitis B and other STBBI. Your partners include your sexual and drug use partners. Your long-term partners and children may also need to be tested.

All discussions are strictly confidential.

Further Information

For more information, contact your healthcare provider, your local Public Health office or Tele-Care 811 or visit www.gnb.ca/publichealth

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