

Hepatitis B Vaccine: What you need to know

1. What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious infection that affects the liver. It is caused by the hepatitis B virus.

Hepatitis B can cause:

Acute (short-term) illness. This can lead to:

- loss of appetite
- diarrhea and vomiting
- tiredness
- jaundice (yellow skin or eyes)
- pain in muscles, joints, and stomach

Chronic (long-term) infection. Some people go on to develop chronic hepatitis B infection. Most of them do not have symptoms, but the infection is still very serious, and can lead to:

- liver damage (cirrhosis)
- liver cancer
- death

Chronic infection is more common among infants and children than among adults. People who are chronically infected can spread hepatitis B virus to others, even if they don't look or feel sick.

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Hepatitis B virus is easily spread through contact with the blood or other body fluids of an infected person. People can also be infected from contact with a contaminated object, where the virus can live for up to 7 days.

- A baby whose mother is infected can be infected at birth;
- Children, adolescents, and adults can become infected by:
 - contact with blood and body fluids through breaks in the skin such as bites, cuts, or sores;
 - contact with objects that have blood or body fluids on them such as toothbrushes, razors, or monitoring and treatment devices for diabetes;
 - having unprotected sex with an infected person;
 - sharing needles when injecting drugs;
 - being stuck with a used needle.

2. Hepatitis B vaccine: Why get vaccinated?

Hepatitis B vaccine can prevent hepatitis B, and the serious consequences of hepatitis B infection, including liver cancer and cirrhosis.

Hepatitis B vaccine may be given by itself or in the same shot with other vaccines.

Vaccination gives long-term protection from hepatitis B infection, possibly lifelong.

3. Who should get hepatitis B vaccine and when?

Children and adolescents

- Babies normally get 3 doses of hepatitis B vaccine:
1st Dose: Birth
2nd Dose: 1-2 months of age
3rd Dose: 6-18 months of age

Anyone through 18 years of age who didn't get the vaccine when they were younger should also be vaccinated.

Adults

- All unvaccinated adults at risk for hepatitis B infection should be vaccinated. This includes:
 - sex partners of people infected with hepatitis B,
 - men who have sex with men,
 - people who inject street drugs,
 - people with more than one sex partner,
 - people with chronic liver or kidney disease,
 - people under 60 years of age with diabetes,
 - people with jobs that expose them to human blood or other body fluids,
 - household contacts of people infected with hepatitis B,
 - residents and staff in institutions for the developmentally disabled,
 - kidney dialysis patients,
 - people who travel to countries where hepatitis B is common,
 - people with HIV infection.
- Pregnant women who are at risk for one of the reasons stated above should be vaccinated. Other pregnant women who want protection may be vaccinated.

4. Who should not get hepatitis B vaccine?

- Anyone with a life-threatening allergy to yeast, or to any other component of the vaccine, should not get hepatitis B vaccine. Tell your doctor if you have any severe allergies.
- Anyone who has had a life-threatening allergic reaction to a previous dose of hepatitis B vaccine should not get another dose.
- Anyone who is moderately or severely ill when a dose of vaccine is scheduled should probably wait until they recover before getting the vaccine.

5. What are the risks from hepatitis B vaccine?

Hepatitis B is a very safe vaccine. Most people do not have any problems with it.

6. What if there is a serious reaction?

What should I look for?

- Look for anything that concerns you, such as signs of a severe allergic reaction, very high fever, or behavior changes.

Signs of a severe allergic reaction can include hives, swelling of the face and throat, difficulty breathing, a fast heartbeat, dizziness, and weakness. These would start a few minutes to a few hours after the vaccination.