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Information about vaccines against Hepatitis B virus

What is hepatitis B virus?

Hepatitis B is a virus that infects the liver, the part of the body that helps digest food and remove waste from the body. Hepatitis B infection can cause liver failure, liver cancer and it can also lead to death. Hepatitis B can be passed from person to person.

How can hepatitis B virus be spread?

You can get hepatitis B through contact with blood or other body fluids from an infected person. It can be spread through sex, sharing needles or razors, tattooing or body piercing equipment. An infected mother can pass the virus to her baby at birth. Hepatitis B virus is up to 100 times more infectious than HIV. The virus can live on surfaces for days and remain infectious. You can not get the hepatitis B virus from ordinary daily contact like sneezing, coughing or hugging.

Can hepatitis B virus be treated?

There is no treatment for acute infection of hepatitis B virus. There are some medications that may help a person who has chronic infection but they are not always successful.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis B virus?

About half of all people who get the virus will have no symptoms but can still pass it on to others. Those who do have symptoms may feel tired, have a fever, lose their appetite, sometimes have yellow eyes and skin and can have dark-coloured urine. Hepatitis B can only be diagnosed through a blood test.

Can hepatitis B be prevented?

Yes. Getting vaccinated with the hepatitis B vaccine will prevent you from becoming infected should you come into contact with someone with hepatitis B. Make sure that clean equipment is used when receiving tattoos or body piercing. Do not share personal care products like razors or toothbrushes and do not have unprotected sexual activity.

Who should be vaccinated against hepatitis B?

Everyone should get the hepatitis B vaccine, especially family members of someone infected with the virus, injection drug users, people with multiple sexual partners, health care workers, babies born to mothers with hepatitis B and people on dialysis for kidney failure. Toronto Public Health provides the vaccine free to these high-risk groups and to all grade 7 students in Toronto schools.

Who should not be vaccinated against hepatitis B?

You should not be vaccinated against hepatitis B virus if you have already been vaccinated against the virus, if you have had a serious reaction to any part of the hepatitis B vaccine, or if you have already been infected with the virus and have had a blood test that shows you are immune. If you have a fever or anything more serious than a minor cold, you should wait until you recover before getting the vaccine.

Fact Sheet

What are the possible side effects of the vaccine?

Some people may get redness or soreness at the injection site. A small number of people will feel tired and have a slight fever after having their shot but this usually goes away within 24 hours. Contact a doctor or health care professional if you have a more serious reaction.

Can this vaccine be given with other vaccines?

Yes. Studies show that it is safe to give the hepatitis B vaccine with other vaccines. Giving different shots at the same time does not weaken the body's response to them.

Do I have to pay for the hepatitis B vaccine?

Hepatitis B vaccine is free for grade 7 students (12 years old) and the following groups:

- infants born to mothers with hepatitis B
- household contacts of people with current hepatitis B infection and carriers (those with past infection who are still infectious to others)
- injection drug users
- sexual contacts of acute cases and carriers
- men who have sex with men
- people with multiple sex partners
- patients on renal dialysis and those with diseases which require frequent receipt of blood products
- those having needle stick injuries in a non-health care setting
- children and adults in the community awaiting liver transplants
- children six years old and younger whose families are from countries with a high prevalence of hepatitis B
- anyone who tests positive for hepatitis C

A person who is not eligible for the free vaccine can purchase it through a pharmacy or their doctor and have it given by a doctor or other health care professional.

What else do I need to know about the hepatitis B vaccine?

Hepatitis B vaccine requires two doses (if you are between 11 and 15 years of age) or three doses (all other age groups) for complete protection. Individuals travelling may receive three doses in 21 days to give them protection for their trip but should have another dose at 12 months for long-term protection.

Where can I get this vaccine?

A doctor or other health care provider can give this vaccine to eligible individuals. Remember to tell the doctor or your health care professional about any side effects you have had to vaccines or other medicine and be sure to update your yellow immunization card every time a vaccine is given.

Where can I find more information?

For more information about the hepatitis B vaccine, call the Immunization Information Line at 416-392-1250 or speak with your doctor.