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Am I at risk of hepatitis B?

What is it?

Hepatitis B is a virus that infects the liver and can lead to serious liver disease. The liver is an important organ and is responsible for breaking down food and harmful chemicals, making essential proteins and storing essential vitamins, minerals, irons and sugars.

How common is it?

There are about 350 million people infected with hepatitis B in the world at any one time.

About 600 – 800 new cases a year are reported in England and Wales, with 50 - 60 cases a year reported in Wales alone. The number of reported cases is low compared with some other countries but many more people will have the disease and not know about it.

What are the symptoms?

Many people with hepatitis B infection don't know they are infected as they have no symptoms at all. Others may experience a range of symptoms when they are first infected. These may include flu-like illness, extreme tiredness, loss of appetite, yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice); and/or dark urine. Anyone with the infection can pass it on to others, even if they don't have any symptoms or don't know they are infected. Hepatitis B infection is usually identified by a blood test.

Some more information about hepatitis B

Most people infected as adults recover fully from the infection. However, out of every 100 people infected:

- up to 1 person may suffer acute liver failure shortly after infection; and
- about 5 will go on to develop long term infection - becoming carriers who can transmit infection to others. About 1 of these carriers will develop serious liver disease later in life.

Children and infants infected with hepatitis B are more likely to become carriers of the virus, but less likely than adults to show any immediate signs of infection. Often an infected child will carry the virus for the rest of his/her life and is more likely to develop serious liver disease in the longer term.

There is no cure for hepatitis B yet but there is some treatment which may help to stop the liver damage from getting worse and the virus from multiplying. The effectiveness of this treatment differs between individuals.

There are other types of infective hepatitis, such as hepatitis A and hepatitis C, and they are different from hepatitis B.

How are people infected?

The hepatitis B virus is present in the blood and some other body fluids of infected people. It is very infectious. The main ways that the infection is spread from one person to another are:

- having sex with an infected person without using a condom (woman/man and man/man intercourse). This is a risk as body fluids can contain the virus;
- from an infected mother to her baby;
- by sharing drug injecting equipment (includes needles, syringes, spoons, water and filters);
- by sharing toothbrushes, razors or equipment used for tattooing and body piercing if they haven't been cleaned properly; or
- by blood to blood contact (for example receiving contaminated blood or blood products).

Who is at risk?

People in the following groups may be at an increased risk of catching hepatitis B:

- babies born to an infected mother;
- the partner, child, or household member of someone who is infected;
- those in jobs where there may be contact with infectious body fluids, for example doctors, nurses, dentists, prison officers, or policemen;
- anyone who changes their sexual partner frequently, especially if they do not always use condoms; or
- anyone who injects drugs and shares injecting equipment.

If you think you, or someone in your family, may be at increased risk you should discuss this with your doctor, practice nurse, or genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinic.

If you are travelling to a country where hepatitis B is common you may also be at an increased risk. You can discuss the need for vaccination with your GP, practice nurse, or travel clinic who will be able to advise about vaccination and the high risk activities that should be avoided whilst abroad.

Can I be protected from hepatitis B infection?

Yes. There is a highly effective vaccine available. If you think you might be at increased risk of hepatitis B speak to your GP, practice nurse, or local GUM clinic. They will help you decide if you should have the vaccination to protect you as well as offer guidance on how to reduce your risks.

What is the Hepatitis B vaccination?

Hepatitis B vaccination is normally given as a course of 3 injections. The vaccine is very safe and most countries worldwide include the vaccine in the routine baby immunisation schedule. It is important that you complete the whole course for greatest protection.

If you think you might be at an increased risk of hepatitis B speak to your GP or practice nurse. Alternatively contact your local GUM clinic for confidential, anonymous advice and testing.

Where can I get more information?

You can phone NHS Direct Wales on
0845 46 47

or

Visit the Public Health Wales website at:

www.publichealthwales.wales.nhs.uk/

or from:

The British Liver Trust

2 Southampton Road, Ringwood, BH24 1HY

Free Helpline: 0800 652 7330

General enquiries: 01425 481320

Fax: 01425 481335

Email: info@britishlivertrust.org.uk

www.britishlivertrust.org.uk