



Hepatitis B and liver cancer

This fact sheet is about the hepatitis B virus and its link with liver cancer.

Almost 240,000 Australians have chronic hepatitis B. Many do not know they have it and may be at risk of liver cancer.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B, or 'hep B', is a virus. It affects the liver. It can cause:

- inflammation (swelling)
- scarring (also known as cirrhosis); and/or
- liver cancer.

What does chronic hepatitis B mean?

People who have had hepatitis B for more than six months have 'chronic' hepatitis. Chronic means long-term. Most would have got it as babies or young children. Those with chronic hepatitis B may feel well. They may not have any signs of the infection. However, some people will go on to get scars in the liver and/or liver cancer.

How do you get hepatitis B?

A vaccine will protect you against hepatitis B virus. The hepatitis B virus is carried in body fluids and blood. The virus spreads when these fluids get into the body of another person who is not vaccinated.

It can be spread:

- from mother to child during pregnancy or childbirth (if the baby does not get a vaccine at birth).
- through unprotected sex
- by sharing injecting drug equipment
- by unsterile medical procedures
- by infected blood going into the bloodstream in some other way, such as unsterile tattooing.

It cannot be spread by:

- sharing food, drinks and cutlery
- hugging and kissing
- shaking hands.

How do you find out if you have chronic hepatitis B?

Ask your doctor for a hepatitis B blood test. A blood test can tell you if you:

- have chronic hepatitis B
- need a vaccine to protect you
- have had a vaccine in the past and are protected.

Two in five people with chronic hepatitis B in Australia do not know they have it. Many people do not show any signs of it.

If you do not have hepatitis B, getting a vaccine will protect you against hepatitis B infection.

Who should be tested for hepatitis B?

1. People who were born in Asia, Pacific region, Africa, Central and South America, Eastern and Southern Europe, Caribbean and the Middle East. The health checks you need to migrate to Australia usually do not test for hepatitis B.
2. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
3. It is important for family members of people with hepatitis B to be tested (even if they were born in Australia).

What is the link between hepatitis B and liver cancer?

The hepatitis B virus can cause liver cancer. Liver cancer is a growth in the liver. People with or without scarring can get liver cancer.

Up to one in four people with chronic hepatitis B will get scarring and/or liver cancer.

Who is at risk of hepatitis B-related liver cancer?

Anybody with chronic hepatitis B can get liver cancer. There is no such thing as a healthy carrier. Everyone with chronic hepatitis B needs regular check-ups.

What will this check-up involve?

It is a good idea to have regular check-ups with your doctor. He or she will be able to give you advice about chronic hepatitis B.

Usually people with chronic hepatitis B will have a blood test every six months. This is to see how their liver is working.

If your doctor wants to do more check-ups to prevent liver cancer, you may have:

- extra blood tests
- a liver ultrasound or scan every six months to check for cancer growth in your liver.

These check-ups will help to pick up signs of liver cancer earlier, when they are smaller and easier to treat. Usually these tests are done for people who:

- are of Asian background (men aged over 40 years and women aged over 50 years)
- are of African background and aged over 20 years
- have a family history of liver cancer
- have liver scarring (cirrhosis)
- are of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background aged over 50.

Is there a treatment for chronic hepatitis B?

There is a treatment for chronic hepatitis B. This can keep the virus under control. The treatment is not a cure, but can help prevent liver damage and cancer over the longer term.

Not everyone with chronic hepatitis B will need treatment. The body can control the infection. A doctor will help you decide when you need treatment.

Even if you don't need treatment, it is still important you have your six-monthly check-ups.

If you have a Medicare card, the government can pay for some or all of your treatment. If you do not have a Medicare card, talk to your specialist about what to do.

Is there treatment for liver cancer?

Treatment for liver cancer will depend on the size of the cancer and if it has spread. Liver cancer is easier to treat if it is found early. Talk to a doctor about your options for treatment.

We recommend the following steps to lower your risk of hepatitis B-related liver cancer:

- Ask for a blood test to check if you have chronic hepatitis B, especially if you are in a high-risk group.
- If you have not had the hepatitis B vaccine, we recommended you get it. The vaccine is free for:
 - all newborn babies
 - partners, family and household members of people with hepatitis B
 - refugees and asylum seekers.
- If you have chronic hepatitis B, get regular check-ups with a doctor.

To reduce your overall risk of cancer:

- have little or no alcohol
- eat lots of fruit and vegetables
- don't eat much fat or many processed meats
- keep a healthy body weight
- exercise regularly (start slowly and do more over time)
- quit smoking
- use sun protection (e.g. sunscreen, hat, sunglasses)
- screen for cervical, breast and bowel cancer as needed.

Where can I get more information?

Visit www.cancervic.org.au or contact Cancer Council Victoria in your language, call 13 14 50. When you call, say your language (e.g. Arabic) and ask for Cancer Council Victoria.

For information on hepatitis B visit www.hepvic.org.au or call the Hepatitis Infoline on 1800 703 003. For an interpreter call 13 14 50.

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