

Key aspects briefly summarized

- Hepatitis B is a liver infection caused by a virus.
- The virus is transmitted through sexual contact, but can also be transmitted through blood (products), e.g. when sharing syringes, tattoo needles, etc.
- There is a safe and very effective vaccine that offers long-lasting protection.
- The hepatitis B vaccination is recommended for all infants and adolescents up to the age of 16 and for risk groups regardless of age.

Disease

Hepatitis B is caused by a highly contagious virus that affects the liver. The course of the disease varies greatly, with up to a third of those infected showing no symptoms.

Occurrence / Risk areas

Hepatitis B is found all over the world, but mainly in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and parts of America. In Switzerland, around 0.5 - 0.7 per cent of the population are chronically infected with the hepatitis B virus. Men who have sex with men (MSM) and the age group of the 30 to 59 year olds are most frequently affected, accounting for around two thirds of all acute cases.

Transmission

Transmission occurs mainly through contact with bodily fluids of infected persons, especially genital secretions and blood. Accordingly, infection occurs primarily during sexual intercourse (genital, anal, oral) and when sharing syringes. In countries where the virus is more widespread and hygiene conditions are poorer, it can also be transmitted through the use of non-sterile instruments by doctors / dentists or tattooists, as well as through blood transfusions or infusions. Furthermore, infected mothers can transmit the disease to their child during birth.

Symptoms

One third of newly infected adults show no symptoms. The classic picture of hepatitis B presents itself 1.5 to 6 months after infection with fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and fever. Jaundice (yellow skin and eyes) may also occur. The disease usually heals completely on its own, especially in adults. Around 5-10% of adults with the disease, but 90% of infants, develop chronic hepatitis B. This can lead to liver remodelling (liver cirrhosis) with functional impairment or liver cancer.

Treatment

In the first phases of the infection, treatment aims at relieving the symptoms, as the disease usually heals on its own. Chronic hepatitis B can be controlled with antiviral medication, but often without achieving a complete cure. It is important to prevent the infection of close contacts (family members, sexual contacts).

Prevention

There are safe and effective vaccines that offer lifelong protection after two to three doses. Vaccination is recommended for infants as part of the combined vaccination programme at 2, 4 and 12 months of age. For adolescents up to and including the age of 15 years, 2 vaccinations are recommended at intervals of 4-6 months. Adolescents aged 16 and over and adults require 3 vaccinations. Persons who would benefit from this vaccine are people at increased risk, such as healthcare workers; MSM; people with other liver disease and drug users. There is also a combination vaccine with hepatitis A.

Further information

- [Federal Office of Public Health \(FOPH\). Hepatitis B](#) EN
- [Hepatitis Switzerland](#) EN