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Hepatitis B

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Diagnosis

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Your doctor will examine you and look for signs of liver damage, such as yellowing skin or belly pain. Tests that can help diagnose hepatitis B or its complications are:

- **Blood tests.** Blood tests can detect signs of the hepatitis B virus in your body and tell your doctor whether it's acute or chronic. A simple blood test can also determine if you're immune to the condition.
- **Liver ultrasound.** A special ultrasound called transient elastography can show the amount of liver damage.
- **Liver biopsy.** Your doctor might remove a small sample of your liver for testing (liver biopsy) to check for liver damage. During this test, your doctor inserts a thin needle through your skin and into your liver and removes a tissue sample for laboratory analysis.

Screening healthy people for hepatitis B

Doctors sometimes test certain healthy people for hepatitis B infection because the virus can damage the liver before causing signs and symptoms. Talk to your doctor about screening for hepatitis B infection if you:

- Are pregnant
- Live with someone who has hepatitis B

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- Have had many sexual partners
- Have had sex with someone who has hepatitis B
- Are a man who has sex with men
- Have a history of a sexually transmitted illness
- Have HIV or hepatitis C
- Have a liver enzyme test with unexplained abnormal results
- Receive kidney dialysis
- Take medications that suppress the immune system, such as those used to prevent rejection after an organ transplant
- Use illegal injected drugs
- Are in prison
- Were born in a country where hepatitis B is common, including Asia, the Pacific Islands, Africa and Eastern Europe
- Have parents or adopted children from places where hepatitis B is common, including Asia, the Pacific Islands, Africa and Eastern Europe

More Information

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Treatment

Treatment to prevent hepatitis B infection after exposure

If you know you've been exposed to the hepatitis B virus and aren't sure if you've been vaccinated, call your doctor immediately. An injection of immunoglobulin (an antibody) given within 12 hours of exposure to the virus may help protect you from getting sick with hepatitis B. Because this treatment only provides short-term protection, you also should get the hepatitis B vaccine at the same time, if you never received it.

Treatment for acute hepatitis B infection

If your doctor determines your hepatitis B infection is acute — meaning it is short-lived and will go away on its own — you may not need treatment.

Instead, your doctor might recommend rest, proper nutrition and plenty of fluids while your body fights the infection. In severe cases, antiviral drugs or a hospital stay is needed to prevent complications.

Treatment for chronic hepatitis B infection

Most people diagnosed with chronic hepatitis B infection need treatment for the rest of their lives. Treatment helps reduce the risk of liver disease and prevents you from passing the infection to others. Treatment for chronic hepatitis B may include:

- **Antiviral medications.** Several antiviral medications — including entecavir (Baraclude), tenofovir (Viread), lamivudine (Epivir), adefovir (Hepsera) and telbivudine (Tyzeka) — can help fight the virus and slow its ability to damage your liver. These drugs are taken by mouth. Talk to your doctor about which medication might be right for you.
- **Interferon injections.** Interferon alfa-2b (Intron A) is a man-made version of a substance produced by the body to fight infection. It's used mainly for young people with hepatitis B who wish to avoid long-term treatment or women who might want to get pregnant within a few years, after completing a finite course of therapy. Interferon should not be used during pregnancy. Side effects may include nausea, vomiting, difficulty breathing and depression.
- **Liver transplant.** If your liver has been severely damaged, a liver transplant may be an option. During a liver transplant, the surgeon removes your damaged liver and replaces it with a healthy liver. Most transplanted livers come from deceased donors, though a small number come from living donors who donate a portion of their livers.

Other drugs to treat hepatitis B are being developed.

More Information

[Liver transplant](#)

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Lifestyle and home remedies

If you've been infected with hepatitis B, take steps to protect others from the virus.

- **Make sex safer.** If you're sexually active, tell your partner you have HBV and talk about the risk of transmitting it to him or her. Use a new latex condom every time you have sex, but remember that condoms reduce but don't eliminate the risk.
- **Tell your sexual partner to get tested.** Anyone with whom you've had sex needs to be tested for the virus. Your partners also need to know their HBV status so that they don't infect others.
- **Don't share personal care items.** If you use IV drugs, never share needles and syringes. And don't share razor blades or toothbrushes, which may carry traces of infected blood.

Coping and support

If you've been diagnosed with hepatitis B infection, the following suggestions might help you cope:

- **Learn about hepatitis B.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is a good place to start.
- **Stay connected to friends and family.** You can't spread hepatitis B through casual contact, so don't cut yourself off from people who can offer support.
- **Take care of yourself.** Eat a healthy diet full of fruits and vegetables, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep.
- **Take care of your liver.** Don't drink alcohol or take prescription or over-the-counter drugs without consulting your doctor. Get tested for hepatitis A and C. Get vaccinated for hepatitis A if you haven't been exposed.

Preparing for your appointment

You're likely to start by seeing your family doctor or a general practitioner. However, in some cases, you may be referred immediately to a specialist. Doctors who specialize in treating hepatitis B include:

- Doctors who treat digestive diseases (gastroenterologists)
- Doctors who treat liver diseases (hepatologists)
- Doctors who treat infectious diseases

What you can do

Here's some information to help you get ready for your appointment.

- **Be aware of pre-appointment restrictions.** When you make the appointment, ask if there's anything you need to do in advance, such as restrict your diet.
- **Write down your symptoms,** including any that may seem unrelated to the reason for which you scheduled the appointment.
- **Write down key personal information,** including major stresses or recent life changes.
- **Make a list of all medications,** vitamins and supplements you take.
- **Consider taking a family member or friend along.** Someone who accompanies you may help you remember the information you receive.
- **Write down questions to ask** your doctor.

Listing questions for your doctor can help you make the most of your time together. For hepatitis B infection, some basic questions to ask your doctor include:

- What is likely causing my symptoms or condition?
- Other than the most likely cause, what are other possible causes for my symptoms or condition?
- What tests do I need?
- Is my condition likely temporary or chronic?
- Has hepatitis B damaged my liver or caused other complications, such as kidney problems?
- What is the best course of action?
- What are the alternatives to the primary approach you're suggesting?
- I have other health conditions. How can I best manage them together?
- Are there restrictions that I need to follow?
- Should I see a specialist?
- Should my family be tested for hepatitis B?
- How can I protect people around me from hepatitis B?
- Is there a generic alternative to the medicine you're prescribing?
- Are there brochures or other printed material I can have? What websites do you recommend?

What to expect from your doctor

Your doctor is likely to ask you a number of questions, including:

- When did your symptoms begin?
- Have your symptoms been continuous or occasional?
- How severe are your symptoms?
- What, if anything, seems to improve your symptoms?
- What, if anything, appears to worsen your symptoms?
- Have you ever had a blood transfusion?
- Do you inject drugs?
- Have you had unprotected sex?
- How many sexual partners have you had?
- Have you been diagnosed with hepatitis?

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