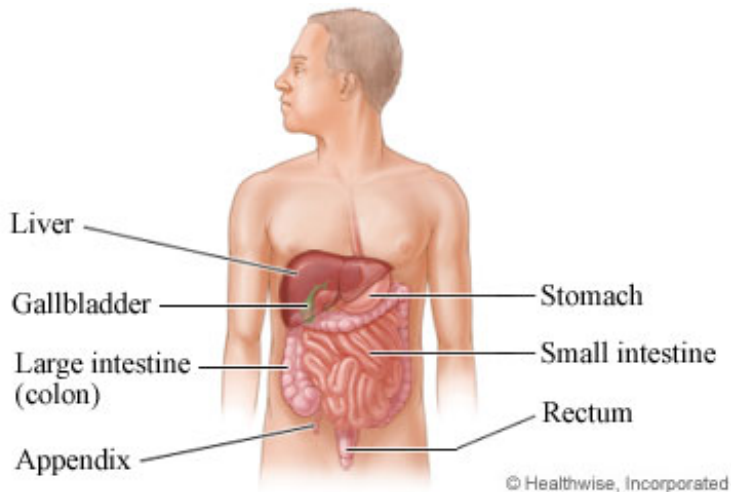


Learning About Hepatitis B



What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that infects the liver. Most people who get it have it for a short time and then get better. This is called acute hepatitis B.

Sometimes the virus causes a long-term infection, called chronic hepatitis B. Over time, it can damage your liver. Babies and young children infected with the virus are more likely to get chronic hepatitis B.

You can have hepatitis B and not know it. You may not have symptoms. If you do, they can make you feel like you have the flu. As long as you have the virus, you can spread it to others.

What happens when you have hepatitis B?

Most adults who get hepatitis B have it for a short time and then get better. Sometimes the disease lasts a long time. Having this disease for a long time can damage your liver and increase the risk of liver cancer. After you've had hepatitis B and recovered, you won't get it again.

What are the symptoms?

Most people who get hepatitis B do not have symptoms. If you have symptoms, you may just feel like you have the flu. Symptoms usually start to go away in 2 to 3 weeks and may include:

- Fatigue.
- A fever.
- Headaches.
- Nausea.
- Vomiting.
- Light-colored stools.
- Dark urine.
- Yellow skin and eyes (jaundice).

How can you prevent hepatitis B?

The hepatitis B vaccine is the best way to prevent infection. The vaccine is a series of 2, 3, or 4 shots. At-risk adults and all babies, children, and teenagers should be vaccinated.

A combination vaccine that protects against both hepatitis B and hepatitis A also is available.

To avoid getting or spreading the virus to others:

- Use a condom when you have sex.
- Don't share needles.
- Wear disposable gloves if you have to touch blood.
- Don't share toothbrushes or razors.
- Don't get a tattoo. Or, if you do, make sure that the needles used have been cleaned properly and are sterile.

Medical experts recommend that all pregnant women get tested for hepatitis B. If you have the virus, your baby can get shots to help prevent infection with the virus.

How is hepatitis B treated?

Treatment depends on how active the virus is and if you are at risk for liver damage, such as cirrhosis. For short-term (acute) hepatitis B, you may get a shot of hepatitis B immunoglobulin (HBIG) and the hepatitis B vaccine. For long-term (chronic) hepatitis B, you may get antiviral medicine.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

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