

Hepatitis B and liver cancer



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

Over 210,000 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. 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?

The hepatitis B virus is carried in body fluids and blood. The virus spreads when these fluids get into the body of another person.

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.

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.

One in three 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 the 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.

What is the link between hepatitis B and liver cancer?

The hepatitis B virus can cause liver cancer. Liver cancer is a tumour that grows in the liver. People with or without cirrhosis can get liver cancer.

Up to one in four people with chronic hepatitis B will get cirrhosis 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 for your doctor to send you to a specialist. 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 specialist wants to do more check-ups for liver cancer, you may have:

- blood tests checking for AFP proteins every six months. AFP is a protein that rises when a cancer is growing.
- a liver ultrasound every six months to check for growths 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 and/or
- have liver scarring (cirrhosis).

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. A specialist will help you decide when you need treatment.

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 your specialist 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 chronic hepatitis B, ask your doctor to send you to a liver specialist and get regular check-ups.
- 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.

Ask your doctor for more information.

You can also reduce your overall risk of cancer by:

- having little or no alcohol
- eating lots of fruit and vegetables
- not eating much fat or many processed meats
- keeping a healthy body weight
- exercising regularly (start slowly and do more over time)
- quitting smoking
- screening for cervical, breast and bowel cancer as needed.

Where can I get more information?

Those at risk of liver cancer, or who have liver cancer, can visit www.cancervic.org.au or contact Cancer Council Victoria by calling 13 11 20. For an interpreter call 13 14 50.

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

For information in key languages on hepatitis B visit www.ceh.org.au/mhss/ or call the Multicultural Health and Support Service on 03 9418 9929.

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