

Warning partners

With acute hepatitis B, it is important that sexual partners are informed and tested. This goes for all partners in the six months leading up to diagnosis. If the person is a carrier of the chronic virus, this period is longer. Others who share a living environment with the infected person and may have taken risks, such as sharing drug-using equipment, need to be tested too.

Further information

Further information about hepatitis B and other STIs is available on the Soa Aids Nederland (STI AIDS Netherlands) website. Soa Aids Nederland is a centre of expertise for HIV infection and other STIs. The www.soa aids.nl website gives detailed information on HIV and other STIs. Young people can visit the Dutch information site www.sense.info.

The National Hepatitis Centre provides information about hepatitis on its website: www.hepatitis.nl (Dutch).

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For answers to your questions on STIs, call the AIDS STI Infoline

0900-204 204 0 (10 cents per minute)

Mon - Fri 10 a.m. - 8 p.m.

Thurs and Fri 2 - 8 p.m.

or send an e-mail to: infolijn@soa aids.nl

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Hepatitis B



Hepatitis B is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis B virus. In the Netherlands, the virus is usually transmitted through sexual contact. It enters the body via the mucous membrane (lining and skin) of the genitals and spreads via the bloodstream to the liver. The virus then remains in the liver cells, causing inflammation. Symptoms may vary. Sometimes there are no symptoms at all, but in the long term the liver might be permanently damaged.

Often the body fights off the virus within six months and recovers from the infection. This can then be shown with blood tests. The virus has been cleared and your body has produced antibodies. The person is no longer infectious and is also protected against any new infection with hepatitis B. But sometimes the body does not completely get rid of the virus and the person goes on to develop chronic hepatitis B. Someone with a chronic infection (also known as a “carrier”) remains infectious for others. The risk of becoming a carrier is higher if you get infected when you’re quite young. And the longer a carrier has been infected with the virus, the greater the chance that their liver will be permanently damaged. The carrier can even develop liver cancer.

Hepatitis B is very infectious. The virus is found in blood, but also in other body fluids such as semen, saliva and vaginal fluid.

How do you catch hepatitis B?

A hepatitis B infection is passed on in several ways. For example:

Sexual contact

Unprotected penetrative sex (penis in vagina and penis in anus) in particular. The virus is passed on by contact between semen or vaginal fluid and the partner’s mucous membrane. Any breaks in the skin in that part of the body – often too small to see – increase the risk of infection. That’s why someone having anal sex runs the greatest risk of catching hepatitis. This is because the mucous membrane near and in the anus is easily damaged. Damaged membrane can also be caused by other STIs. So having an STI increases the risk of catching hepatitis B.

The risk of catching hepatitis B during sex is greater during a woman’s period. Unprotected oral sex (licking and sucking) gives only a slight risk of hepatitis B transmission. Although the hepatitis B virus is also present in saliva, people do not become infected from deep kissing.

Blood contact

Infected blood is another way that the virus is passed on. For example, drug users sharing needles and other equipment such as straws, hospitals using contaminated equipment or giving contaminated blood products, and needle stick accidents among health care workers. Unhygienic acupuncture, tattooing and piercing equipment, and shared use of razors or toothbrushes, are other ways of becoming infected.

During childbirth

If a woman has the hepatitis B virus in her blood, it is very likely that she will pass it on to her child during pregnancy or the birth.

Other routes of transmission

The hepatitis B virus can be passed from one person to another in a family or other place where people live under one roof. This is probably the result of razors and toothbrushes being shared and perhaps blood contact which goes unnoticed. Someone can also catch hepatitis B if he or she is bitten by an infected person.



Symptoms

A hepatitis B infection often goes unnoticed because there are no symptoms. Only a small minority of the people who are infected do have symptoms. The most common symptoms are tiredness, fever, joint and muscle pain, listlessness, nausea, and pain in the upper abdomen. Skin disorders and inflamed joints also occur. These symptoms may be followed by a period of jaundice: the skin and whites of the eyes turn yellow, the urine becomes dark (like old tea), and sometimes the stools (faeces) turn pale like putty.

On average, the symptoms appear two to three months after infection. They can last for anything from several weeks to six months. And even after all the other symptoms have gone, the person may feel tired for months.

Possible complications of hepatitis B

If the hepatitis B virus develops into chronic active hepatitis B, it causes a prolonged (i.e. chronic) inflammation of the liver. This chronic infection can ultimately have serious consequences, because scarring is caused in the liver (liver cirrhosis). Due to cirrhosis of the liver means that the liver gradually stops functioning properly and other symptoms may develop. There is also a higher risk of liver cancer.

Treatment

No drugs are given to treat acute hepatitis B. The infection usually goes away by itself within six months. The person is advised to rest as much as possible. Alcohol should be avoided as well as food and drink that it difficult to digest (such as high-fat foods and coffee).

Drugs can be prescribed for chronic hepatitis B. In 40% of those infected, this stops the virus doing any more damage. In 10% of all cases, the virus is cleared from the blood completely.

Vaccination

In the Netherlands, free vaccination is available for people at higher risk of infection with hepatitis B. This includes sex workers, drug users and men who have sex with men. The vaccine that is used is safe and effective.

Vaccination consists of three injections. The second is given one month after the first injection, and the third is given five months after the second injection. Vaccination gives long-term protection against hepatitis B.

It is also possible to give someone antibodies to hepatitis B after exposure to the virus, such as in needle stick accidents or after unprotected sex with someone who is infected. This needs to be done very soon after possible infection, preferably within 24 hours (but definitely within seven days). Babies of mothers with hepatitis B are given antibodies immediately after birth. Then they are given a complete vaccination against hepatitis B together with the standard childhood immunisation programme. If the father is known to be a carrier of the virus and the mother isn't, it is advisable to give the baby a complete vaccination. Giving antibodies after the birth is then unnecessary.

Advice for sexual partner(s), family members and anyone else who lives with you

If someone is aware that he or she is a carrier of the hepatitis B virus, it is advisable for a regular sex partner, family members and anyone else they live with to be vaccinated against hepatitis B. Vaccination is covered by the national insurance system (AWBZ) and is done at a GGD health centre.

Other types of viral hepatitis

Hepatitis A

This type of hepatitis is caused by the hepatitis A virus. It enters the liver through the mouth and the gastrointestinal tract, causing an inflammation. The symptoms of hepatitis A infection are the same as those with hepatitis B. In children the infection usually goes unnoticed. Hepatitis A goes away by itself within several weeks, usually without causing any health problems. It does not cause cirrhosis or liver cancer. The virus is sometimes transmitted sexually, by licking the anus of an infected person ("rimming").

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is the name of an inflammation of the liver caused by infection with the hepatitis C virus. The virus is usually passed on through contact with infected blood, among drug users who share equipment such as straws or syringes, for example. In recent years, sexual transmission of hepatitis C has been seen among gay men infected with HIV. How the virus is passed on during sexual contact is not yet completely clear. Further studies still need to be done. An infection with hepatitis C usually goes unnoticed. Sometimes there are symptoms like tiredness and jaundice. If left untreated, the infection will become chronic in most of those who become infected. This can eventually lead to complications such as those seen with hepatitis B – cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer.