

Hepatitis B

- What You Need To Know

Do you know that viral hepatitis is a common cause of liver disease in Asia and its most common form is hepatitis B, which is prevalent in many Asian countries?

In Singapore, hepatitis B occurs in about 4% of the population and is usually transmitted vertically (i.e. from mother to child during birth). Hepatitis B is the most common cause of liver disease and liver cancer in Singapore. As hepatitis B - related symptoms usually occur in the late stage, screening becomes an important measure in early detection and treatment of hepatitis B.

Here, we share with you some Frequently Asked Questions on hepatitis B:

1. What Is Hepatitis?

Hepatitis is the inflammation (or swelling) of the liver. Normally, the liver helps to change food that you eat into energy. It also breaks down waste products produced in your body. When you have hepatitis, your liver may be damaged and cannot function normally.

Hepatitis can be caused by alcohol, drugs, parasites or viruses. Most cases of hepatitis are caused by viruses. In Singapore, the two most common causes of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A virus (HAV) and hepatitis B virus (HBV). HAV causes hepatitis A while HBV causes hepatitis B.

2. Quick Facts I Should Know About Hepatitis B

- Currently, there is no cure available for hepatitis B.
- 4% of the population in Singapore are hepatitis B carriers.
- Hepatitis B carriers feel well and do not display symptoms of being ill. They carry the virus in their body and can pass the virus to others.
- Hepatitis B carriers may develop complications such as chronic hepatitis, liver cirrhosis (scarring and hardening of the liver), liver failure and liver cancer.

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- Hepatitis B carriers and those with chronic hepatitis and cirrhosis are at a higher risk of developing liver cancer. Liver cancer is the 3rd most common cancer in Singapore, is usually detected late and is fatal.

3. How Do People Get Hepatitis?

Hepatitis is carried in the blood and body fluids such as semen and vaginal fluids. It is spread by:

- Sexual contact with a carrier or an infected person.
- A carrier or an infected mother to her newborn during birth.
- The use of contaminated skin-piercing instruments (in acupuncture, body-piercing and tattooing) and the sharing of injection needles among drug abusers.
- Contact with a carrier or an infected person's saliva or blood through cuts and open sores in the mouth or skin.

4. What Symptoms Should I Look Out For, If Any?

Many people with viral hepatitis have mild or no symptoms at all. Symptoms associated with liver problems include:

- Jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin)
- Dark, tea-coloured urine
- Pale faeces
- Persistent fever
- Prolonged tiredness; severe lethargy
- Loss of appetite
- Severe weight loss
- Upper abdominal pain with nausea and vomiting
- Ascites (water in the abdomen resulting in a swollen abdomen)

5. How Can I Know If I Have Hepatitis B?

A simple blood test can tell whether you have hepatitis B, are immune to it, or are a carrier. Hepatitis B has a long incubation period of two to six months. Symptoms indicative of hepatitis B usually occur late, so go for a blood test to assess if you have hepatitis B.

6. What Should I Do If I Am A Hepatitis B Carrier?

As a carrier, you are at a higher risk of developing liver cancer and should do the following:

- Ensure that your family and close contacts go for the hepatitis B blood test and that those not infected are immunised. It is particularly important to have your future spouse vaccinated. Hepatitis B in Asians is often transmitted vertically, hence there is a high rate of infection within families.
- Go for medical check-ups every six months to one year. Your doctor will do blood tests to find out how well your liver is working and to check for early signs of liver cancer.
- See your doctor immediately if you feel tired, lose weight, notice a change in your bowel habits or experience pain on the upper right side of your abdomen.
- Do not share food that has been in your mouth and do not pre-chew food for babies.
- Be aware of lifestyle, dietary, medication and health recommendations.
- Always wash your hands with soap after contact with your own blood or body fluids.

7. What About Lifestyle And Diet?

Hepatitis B carriers should avoid consuming alcohol. They should maintain a balanced diet and exercise regularly. Take precautions with regard to spillage of blood and close contact sports (e.g. rugby or wrestling). Do not share toothbrushes, combs and razors.

When sharing food, take precautions by using serving cutlery (although transmission via shared food has not been documented).

8. Can Hepatitis B Be Treated? Should I Have Treatments For My Hepatitis B?

Treatment of hepatitis B is directed at reducing inflammation and preventing cirrhosis (hardening of the liver). Only a few patients need treatment - these patients have problems such as liver inflammation or liver cirrhosis. At the moment, treatment is only useful for those with inflammation of the liver or active cirrhosis. Your specialist can advise you if treatment is necessary.

9. How Can I Protect Myself Against Hepatitis?

Hepatitis B can be easily prevented through immunisation. The hepatitis B immunisation consists of three doses over a six-month period:

- 1st dose - at the appointed date.
- 2nd dose - one month after the 1st dose.
- 3rd dose - six months after the 1st dose.

For immunisation to be effective against hepatitis B, all three doses must be completed.

10. What Medications Are Permissible Or Advisable?

Most medications are allowed for hepatitis B carriers but steroids are to be avoided. Patients who have medical conditions that require immune suppression such as arthritis or cancer, must inform their doctor that they have hepatitis B.

Traditional Chinese Medicines or herbal treatments should be avoided, as there have been instances of liver toxicity and side effects. Both anti-oxidants and vitamins have no proven benefits, although, they do not cause any liver damage.

11. Should I See A GP Or A Specialist For My Hepatitis B?

A GP can screen you for hepatitis B as effectively as a specialist. However, if you have any abnormality in your tests or your hepatitis B is complicated (e.g. you have an liver inflammation, have cirrhosis or are on treatment), it is advisable to be followed up by a specialist.

HBTC COMPRISES:

Patient Education

- Talks and forums about hepatitis B-related issues for patients, and the public.
- Bi-annual, free newsletters and educational materials on hepatitis B.

Social Support

- Hepatitis B Community of Friends - a support group for members to share experiences and problems.
- Counselling by trained staff.

Treatment

- A dedicated team of hepatologists at the University Digestive Centre (UDC) to attend to patients' medical needs. Patients will also be contacted for upcoming and missed clinic appointments.
- Information about hepatitis B treatment, therapy and diet.

Financial Assistance

- Health Services Development Programme (HSDP) where eligible patients can receive government subsidy for hepatitis B treatment.

Research and Clinical Trials

- Patients can participate in research projects that aim to discover more about hepatitis B and bring about better treatments.
- Patients can also take part in clinical trials where they can potentially benefit from developments in medical science.

For more information about HBTC, please call 6772 2505 or the Enquiry Hotline at 9171 1079. You can also email your enquiries to hbtc@nuh.com.sg.