

Hepatitis B lowdown ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Just wondering what you could tell me about Hepatitis B. My mother was just recently diagnosed with it, so I'd like some more information about what it is, what it does, who gets it, and the like.

? Curious

Answer

Dear Curious,

Arming yourself with the knowledge about Hepatitis is a great way to help your mother cope with her illness and prevent the spread to others. Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the Hepatitis B virus (HBV) and causes inflammation of the liver and liver cell damage. Most hepatitis cases last less than one year. Each year, six to ten percent of Hepatitis B infections in the United States become chronic, which means that an individual continues to be highly contagious and risks developing cirrhosis of the liver and liver cancer. At first, individuals infected with Hepatitis B will not show any symptoms. Some people experience mild flu-like symptoms (i.e., fever, aches, loss of appetite, fatigue). As the disease progresses, many people develop temporary jaundice (a yellowing of the skin) and dark urine.

Hepatitis B transmission occurs when blood or body fluids of an infected individual come into contact with breaks in the skin or mucous membrane of an uninfected individual. Hepatitis B is primarily transmitted through sexual contact, needle sharing, and blood transfusions. In some areas of the world, Hepatitis B is endemic and may be transmitted from mothers to their newborns, who become chronic asymptomatic carriers. If you were born in a high-risk area, you may want to consider seeing a health care provider, who can determine whether you are a Hep B carrier.

Though highly contagious, Hepatitis B is preventable. There is a vaccine for Hepatitis B that is administered in three injections over a six month period. Additional precautions include practicing safer sex and avoiding unsterile needles (for drugs and tattoos). It is strongly recommended that individuals who have had close personal contact with an infected individual be screened and vaccinated.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) ^[2], medication is not used to treat acute Hepatitis B, but health care providers may recommend rest, adequate nutrition

and fluids, and in some cases, hospitalization. Individuals with chronic Hepatitis B are closely monitored for liver disease and may be prescribed medications that decrease the risk of liver damage and slow down the virus. It is also strongly recommended that those with chronic Hep B avoid alcohol, as this could increase the risk of liver damage.

If you are affiliated with a university, counseling and screening for Hepatitis B are likely available for students at your student health services. After counseling and antibody testing, a six month immunization program can be undertaken. For more information, see your health care provider. For more information on Hepatitis B, check out the [American Liver Foundation](#) [3]

With the appropriate care, your mother can hopefully lower her risk of developing liver problems and of transmitting HBV to others.

Alice!

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