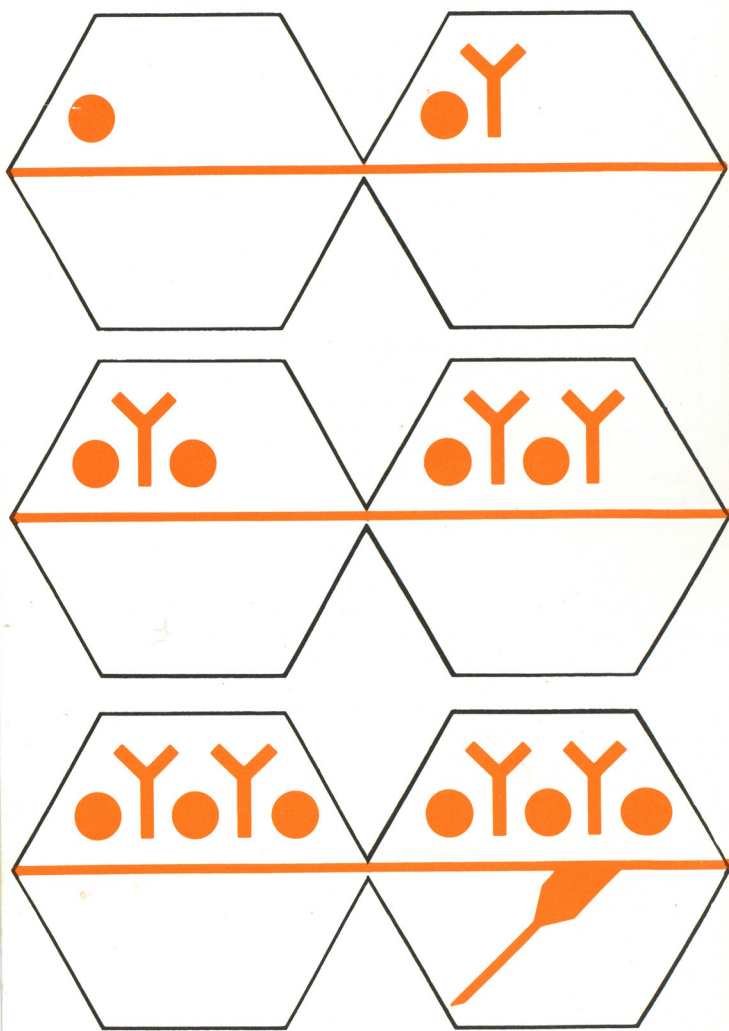


Viral Hepatitis

Risks/Precautions/Prevention
for
Gay Men



Hepatitis B: Facts worth knowing¹

- Approximately 200,000 new cases of hepatitis B virus occur in the United States each year. Over half of these infections are never diagnosed.
- Gay men are infected with hepatitis B virus more than any other sub-population in the United States. Approximately 60 percent of gay men show signs of previous hepatitis B infection;² no other sub-population compares to this number.
- Of the 200,000 people who will become infected with hepatitis B virus this year, it is estimated 52,000 will develop jaundice with liver damage, 10,000 will be hospitalized, and 250 will die of fulminant hepatitis¹.
- The number of people who are carriers for hepatitis B virus is increasing each year. Today, nearly a million chronic carriers live in the United States, and the number is growing almost 3 percent annually. Many chronic carriers do not know that they might be reproducing or carrying the virus and that they can infect others. Five percent of sexually active gay males are carriers; thus 1 in 20 of your potential sexual contacts can give you the disease.²
- Carriers of hepatitis B are 273 times more likely to develop liver cancer than non-carriers.³ Over 900 people die each year due to cancer of the liver related to hepatitis B virus.
- Americans spend three quarters of a billion dollars annually on direct and indirect medical costs related to hepatitis B virus.

Hepatitis B is a venereal disease

For many years, hepatitis B virus was known to be transmitted through exposure to contaminated blood or blood products. More recently, researchers have implicated all body fluids as potentially infectious. In particular, sexual transmission of hepatitis B virus, especially among gay men, has been observed as a significant health problem.

Sexual transmission occurs when infectious secretions such as semen or saliva and, of course, blood enter the body either orally, through breaks in mucous membranes, or through skin punctures. Since most people with hepatitis B are not aware that they are infectious, the disease spreads without their knowledge. Homosexually active men are 10 to 15 times more likely to acquire hepatitis B infection than men in the general population.² In a study of 500 sexually active gay men in New York, 18 percent developed hepatitis B in one year.⁴

How can I minimize the cost of being vaccinated?

Clinical studies indicate that approximately 60 percent of gay men show signs of previous hepatitis B infection,² which means 6 out of 10 are already immune and don't need vaccination. By having your blood tested for hepatitis B infection or immunity, your doctor can determine whether you need to be vaccinated. If you are immune, the fee for these tests will be substantially less than receiving the vaccine without prior testing.

Making sure that the vaccine produces immunity

Although clinical studies have shown that 85 to 95 percent of those vaccinated evidence immunity, as many as 15 percent of persons vaccinated may not achieve the desired result.² Immunocompromised individuals have not responded as well as healthy adults. The immune response may be especially poor in people older than 40 years, and males do not respond as well as females.⁶

You should be tested within 6 months of your vaccination, and yearly after that for 5 years to determine if you are immune. It is expected that a booster dose may be necessary 5 years after initial vaccination to maintain immune status.⁷

Adverse reactions from the vaccine

Side effects have been minimal in vaccine trials. The most common complaint has been arm soreness; a few individuals have reported rash, nausea, joint pain, and low-grade fever.

Many people are concerned about the possible transmission of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and Kaposi's sarcoma; it is unknown whether these are conveyed by blood and blood products. The current hepatitis B vaccine, although produced from the pooled blood of chronic carriers, is manufactured utilizing several processes believed to inactivate all known groups of viruses.

What to do if you have been exposed to hepatitis B virus recently

If you suspect that you have been exposed to a person who was infectious or a carrier of hepatitis B virus, see your physician at once. In certain situations, a blood product known to contain a very high quantity of antibody to hepatitis B virus (hepatitis B immune globulin/H-BIG) may be prescribed. Some researchers have suggested combining the new vaccine with injection of hepatitis B immune globulin.

Hepatitis B: Facts worth knowing¹

- Approximately 200,000 new cases of hepatitis B virus occur in the United States each year. Over half of these infections are never diagnosed.
- Gay men are infected with hepatitis B virus more than any other sub-population in the United States. Approximately 60 percent of gay men show signs of previous hepatitis B infection;² no other sub-population compares to this number.
- Of the 200,000 people who will become infected with hepatitis B virus this year, it is estimated 52,000 will develop jaundice with liver damage, 10,000 will be hospitalized, and 250 will die of fulminant hepatitis¹.
- The number of people who are carriers for hepatitis B virus is increasing each year. Today, nearly a million chronic carriers live in the United States, and the number is growing almost 3 percent annually. Many chronic carriers do not know that they might be reproducing or carrying the virus and that they can infect others. Five percent of sexually active gay males are carriers; thus 1 in 20 of your potential sexual contacts can give you the disease.²
- Carriers of hepatitis B are 273 times more likely to develop liver cancer than non-carriers.³ Over 900 people die each year due to cancer of the liver related to hepatitis B virus.
- Americans spend three quarters of a billion dollars annually on direct and indirect medical costs related to hepatitis B virus.

Hepatitis B is a venereal disease

For many years, hepatitis B virus was known to be transmitted through exposure to contaminated blood or blood products. More recently, researchers have implicated all body fluids as potentially infectious. In particular, sexual transmission of hepatitis B virus, especially among gay men, has been observed as a significant health problem.

Sexual transmission occurs when infectious secretions such as semen or saliva and, of course, blood enter the body either orally, through breaks in mucous membranes, or through skin punctures. Since most people with hepatitis B are not aware that they are infectious, the disease spreads without their knowledge. Homosexually active men are 10 to 15 times more likely to acquire hepatitis B infection than men in the general population.² In a study of 500 sexually active gay men in New York, 18 percent developed hepatitis B in one year.⁴

Hepatitis B can ruin the rest of your life

Although hepatitis B infection appears mild at times and is often undetected, the health consequences can be devastating.

'I've never seen a more debilitating illness among gay men', stated the executive director of a Midwest homosexual clinic.

For months and even years after infection, some people often say that they are not themselves, do not regain their former levels of energy and stamina, are sometimes forced to take less demanding jobs, and often discontinue many aspects of their previous lifestyle.

There are three general degrees of hepatitis B infection with different associated symptoms and ramifications:

ACUTE

Less severe symptoms (asymptomatic)

- flu-like symptoms (fever, body ache, fatigue)
- loss of appetite
- long-lasting tiredness and fatigue

Serious symptoms (acute)

- yellowing of skin and eyes
- dark urine and light colored stools
- itchy skin
- hospitalization may be required for several weeks
- over-all feeling of grave sickness
- often never regain sense of well-being

CHRONIC

Persistent

- liver usually recovers but blood test shows hepatitis B presence
- not likely to transmit to others

Active

- long-term ill health
- feeling of over-all sickness, weakness, and lethargy
- leads to destruction of liver and cirrhosis

TERMINAL

Fulminant

- complete liver failure and death

Cirrhosis

- liver failure over time due to scarring
- severe bleeding
- ultimate death (11 percent of cirrhosis death caused by hepatitis B)

Liver cancer

- active hepatitis carriers are 273 times more likely to develop liver cancer than non-carriers; the outcome is usually fatal

Vaccinations are not only for kids

Unfortunately, preventive medicine is still a new concept, and some adults erroneously believe that vaccinations are only for children.

There is no cure for hepatitis B, but today it can be prevented. A hepatitis B virus vaccine is now available. Studies indicate that the vaccine will provide immunity for 85 to 95 percent of those vaccinated.² The vaccine is available from your physician.

Do I really need the vaccine?

Perhaps not.

Most likely, people who have already been infected with hepatitis B are either carriers of the virus, or they have recovered and developed natural immunity (which is usually long-lasting). These people do not need to be vaccinated. In high-risk populations such as the gay community, it is likely that the majority of vaccine candidates are already naturally immune and can avoid the unnecessary risk and expense of vaccination.

How do I find out if I'm immune to infection with hepatitis B virus?

Simple blood tests can identify people with immunity to hepatitis B virus. Since 50 percent of the cases of hepatitis B infection are not detected when they occur, blood tests are the only reliable indicator of previous exposure.

I can't afford the vaccine: It's too expensive

Yes, but getting hepatitis B is significantly more costly. No one can place a monetary value on your feeling of well-being and ability to enjoy living to its fullest. In addition, work loss is often significant (lasting weeks to months), and your lifestyle could be disrupted or destroyed.

Hepatitis B may result in extended hospitalization. On an average this can cost from \$2,000 to \$5,500, depending on the severity of the case.⁵ Chronic carriers may incur medical costs for a lifetime.

Bottom-line, the vaccine is an investment in your future well-being. Some local gay organizations and clinics have established financial assistance or payment plans to help persons with special financial need. Information about such programs should be requested directly from your local organization.

Why is it important to tell your physician you are gay?

Certain diseases are seen more in gay men than in non-gay men. Without proper information your physician may make an incorrect diagnosis or fail to take necessary precautions. This is especially true with hepatitis B where gay men have been identified as a high risk group. Your physician will not likely think to ask if you need screening tests and possibly the vaccine because non-gay men have been deemed low risk and are generally not candidates for the vaccine. You must indicate your health care needs to your doctor.

If you need more information about the availability of the tests and the vaccine or want to know more about physicians sensitive to the needs of gay men, contact:

References

1. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 31:317-328, 1982.
2. Szmuness W, Stevens CE, Harley EJ, et al: Demonstration of efficacy in a controlled clinical trial in a high-risk population. *The New England Journal of Medicine* 303:833-841, 1980.
3. Zuckerman AJ: Hepatitis B: Its prevention by vaccine. *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 143:301-304, 1981.
4. Szmuness W: Large scale efficacy trials of hepatitis B vaccine in the USA: Baseline data and protocol. *Journal of Medical Virology* 4:327-340, 1979.
5. Mulley AG, Silverstein MD, Dienstag JL: Indications for the use of hepatitis B vaccine, based on cost-effectiveness analysis. *The New England-Journal of Medicine* 307:644-452, 1982.
6. Krugman S: The newly licensed hepatitis B vaccine. *Journal of the American Medical Association* 247:2012-2015, 1982.
7. Krugman S, quoted in the American Hospital Association's video teleconference 'Developing an immunization program for hepatitis B virus vaccine', October 27, 1982.



ABBOTT LABORATORIES
Diagnostics Division