

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). Lifelong HBV infection can lead to liver cancer or scarring of the liver (cirrhosis).

There are more than 1 million people just in the United States living with lifelong HBV infection. Anyone can get infected with HBV, including your child.



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The hepatitis B vaccine is the best way to protect your child from being infected. HBV often is spread by blood or body fluids. Exposure to these fluids can happen in the following ways:

- During birth (if mother has HBV)
- Sharing personal items like razors or toothbrushes with an infected person
- Having unprotected sex with an infected person
- Injecting or "shooting" drugs using a needle with infected blood.
- Some children also may become infected with HBV while living in the same household as a person with a lifelong form of the infection. It is unknown how or why this happens.

You may feel your child will never be exposed to HBV in any of these ways. However, keep the following facts in mind:

- One third of people who are infected with HBV in the United States don't know how they got it.
- Some people with HBV may not even know they are infected.
- Not everyone with HBV, especially children, feels or looks sick.
- Nearly half of the more than 5,000 adult Americans who die from hepatitis B each year caught their infection in childhood.

People with HBV can pass it to others who aren't protected. Without the hepatitis B vaccine, 1 out of every 20 Americans could become infected. Vaccinating your child against this virus will protect her now and when she is older and exposed to more people.

The hepatitis B vaccine

The vaccine is very safe. No serious reactions have been linked to this vaccine. Side effects are usually mild and include fussiness or soreness where the shot was given. Symptoms usually go away within 48 to 72 hours. Keep in mind, getting the vaccine is much safer than getting the disease.

Your child needs at least 3 doses of hepatitis B vaccine to be fully protected. The doses are usually given:

- At birth
- At 1 to 4 months of age
- At 6 to 18 months of age

Premature babies and newborns with other illnesses may need to have their first dose delayed. Newborns who don't get the vaccine at birth should get all 3 doses by 18 months of age.

If a mother tests positive for HBV, her child must be vaccinated as soon as possible (preferably within 12 hours of birth). The second dose can be given at 1 month of age, and the final dose by 6 months of age.

Older children or teens who have not been immunized and anyone living with a person who is infected by HBV should receive 3 doses of the vaccine to protect against infection.

It's important that your child get all 3 doses. More than 95% of children who receive all the recommended doses of the vaccine are fully protected against the illnesses caused by HBV.

Most children have no side effects with hepatitis B vaccines. Those side effects that do occur are mild and temporary. The possible side effects include:

- Soreness, swelling, and redness where the shot was given
- A mild-to-moderate fever
- fussiness

These symptoms may begin within 24 hours after the shot and usually go away within 48 to 72 hours.

Contraindications for vaccination

In rare cases, there are children who should not get the vaccine, including:

- Children with severe allergies to yeast. Yeast, which is used to make bread, also is used to make the hepatitis B vaccine.
- Children who had a severe reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine.
- Children who are more than mildly sick on the day the vaccination is scheduled. These children may need to wait until they are feeling better. However, children with minor colds, an upset stomach, or a temperature lower than 100.5 °F can safely receive the hepatitis B vaccine.

Remember: Immunizations have protected children for years - but vaccines only work if your child is immunized. It only takes 3 doses of the hepatitis B vaccine to protect your child for a lifetime.