

Hepatitis B – Information

Hepatitis B is an infectious disease that has been known for many years and is caused by the Hepatitis B virus. The acute Hepatitis B is a notifiable disease. It can cause inflammation of the liver. The following symptoms of illness may occur: unusual pain in the upper abdominal area, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, fatigue and jaundice.

Although an infection with the Hepatitis A virus usually clears up without problems, an acute infection of Hepatitis B can cause the virus to remain in the body and cause chronic inflammation of the liver. This is believed to occur in 5 – 10% of cases. People affected with this are at risk of developing cirrhosis of the liver or liver cancer (hepatocellular carcinoma) due to the increasing number of liver cells dying.

The Hepatitis B virus is spread by blood and bodily fluids that contain the virus. It can be transmitted in various ways:

- In the past, Hepatitis B was often seen to develop after blood transfusions. Thanks to the thorough routine screening carried out on blood today, however, this is no longer a problem.
- Another common method of transmission nowadays is sexual intercourse, particularly unprotected sexual intercourse without condoms with sexual partners about whom little or nothing is known as regards their past medical history, whether they are drug users or whether they are promiscuous.
- The Hepatitis B virus is commonly spread among drug users who share infected needles.
- People whose jobs bring them into frequent contact with blood and blood products, such as medical personnel, are also at risk. This is because the virus can also be transmitted through direct blood to blood contact.
- Tattoos, acupuncture and ear-piercing are also potential ways of becoming infected with Hepatitis B.
- The transmission of Hepatitis B from a chronically-infected mother to her child is possible during childbirth.

It is possible to protect against infection with Hepatitis B. The first option is the Hepatitis B vaccination, which is now being given to large numbers of children and which is also recommended for people who are at risk. As with HIV, condoms can reduce the risk of infection with the Hepatitis B virus. Drug users should never use someone else's needle. When handling blood and blood products, medical personnel must adhere to standard hygiene practices.

All chronic Hepatitis B carriers should also observe the following:

- Every sexual partner should be told that you are infected with Hepatitis B. Condoms should be used. Non-infected sexual partners should be screened and vaccinated.
- Doctors, dentists, midwives, naturopaths and personnel whose jobs or voluntary activities are involved with emergency medical services should, when asked, be informed that you have Hepatitis B where there is a risk that the virus may be transmitted.
- No blood must be donated. This also applies to the donation of sperm, tissue or organs.
- Needles should not be shared after intravenous use with any other person (drug users).

It must be pointed out that the wilful infection of another person with the Hepatitis B virus is a criminal personal injury offence as defined by the criminal code, and is punishable as such.

If you have any questions or you'd like to receive an anonymous, free consultation, contact us at: