

Fast Facts Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a virus that attacks the liver. It is transmitted through blood-to-blood, or unprotected sexual contact. A pregnant woman with chronic hepatitis B can transmit the virus to her baby; this is the most important mode of transmission globally.

Two billion people worldwide have been infected with hepatitis B globally, and about 600 000 people die every year due to the consequences of hepatitis B.ⁱ

Despite the availability of a safe and effective vaccine, hepatitis B is the most common liver infection in the world. The hepatitis B virus is up to 100 times more infectious than HIV.ⁱⁱ

In Australia, approximately 218,000 people are living with chronic hepatitis B which is defined as having had the infection for longer than six months. However, nearly half of those living with chronic hepatitis B in Australia are undiagnosed.ⁱⁱⁱ

People with chronic hepatitis B may feel well even though liver damage is occurring. If not diagnosed and treated, chronic hepatitis B can lead to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer and liver failure.

For those already living with chronic hepatitis B, ongoing treatment and monitoring helps provide protection against the development of liver disease and liver cancer.

Less than 3% of people living with chronic hepatitis B in Australia are currently receiving potentially life-saving treatment.^{iv}

Despite the safe and highly effective hepatitis B vaccine being part of the infant immunisation schedule in Australia, many of those at higher risk of infection remain unvaccinated and therefore vulnerable to infection.

People who were born in the Asia-Pacific region, or Africa, have often not been vaccinated despite these regions having much higher population rates of hepatitis B and are therefore more vulnerable to infection..

People in rural and remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities also have a higher burden of chronic hepatitis B than the non-indigenous population and this is coupled with much poorer health outcomes.^v

Without access to appropriate healthcare, one in four adults who were infected early in life will later die due to complications of chronic hepatitis B.

Deaths from primary liver cancer are climbing faster than any other cause of cancer death in Australia and untreated chronic hepatitis B is a major contributor.^{vi}

Most people diagnosed with liver cancer in Australia die within one to two years – many in the first month after diagnosis.

ⁱ WHO Factsheet. Hepatitis B, Factsheet Number 204- July 2013. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs204/en/>

ⁱⁱ Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Chronic Hepatitis B and Asian Pacific Islanders. July 2013. <http://www.cdc.gov/Features/ChronicHepatitisB/>

ⁱⁱⁱ MacLachlan JH, Allard N, Towell V, Cowie BC. The burden of chronic hepatitis B virus infection in Australia, 2011. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 2013; online

^{iv} Cancer Forum March 2012 – Vol 6, Issue 1. Recognising the role of infection: preventing liver cancer in special populations. Kylie S Carville and Benjamin Cowie. http://www.cancerforum.org.au/Issues/2012/March/Forum/Recognising_role_infection.htm

^v Department of Health and Ageing. National Hepatitis B Strategy 2010 – 2013. *Health.gov.au*; online.

[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-national-strategies-2010-hepb/\\$File/hepb.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-national-strategies-2010-hepb/$File/hepb.pdf)

^{vi} Cancer Council Australia. National Liver Cancer Prevention Policy. July 2012. http://wiki.cancer.org.au/prevention/Liver_cancer