For Parents and Other Caregivers: Understanding Hepatitis B and the Hepatitis B Vaccine

What is Hepatitis B (HBV)?

Hepatitis B (HBV) is a viral infection that causes swelling in the liver. A person with HBV can pass the infection to another person through blood and other bodily fluids. Infants can contract HBV during birth if the parent giving birth has HBV.

A person may also contract HBV if they share razors, toothbrushes, and needles with a person who has HBV, if they come into contact with the blood of a person who has HBV, or if they have sex with someone who has HBV.

Some people infected with HBV experience a short-term illness, also called acute HBV. Symptoms include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, jaundice, and pain in the muscles, joints, and stomach.

Acute HBV can lead to chronic HBV, a long-term illness that can cause liver damage, liver cancer, liver failure, and death. **90% of newborns and babies infected with HBV will develop chronic HBV.** The risk of chronic HBV is fully preventable through vaccination, which infants can receive at birth.

The likelihood of developing chronic HBV decreases with age. While most people with chronic HBV do not have symptoms, they can still spread the disease to others. Between 850,000 and 2.2 million people in the United States are living with chronic HBV.

Protecting Your Child from HBV and Liver Cancers Caused by HBV

You can reduce your child's risk of getting HBV and its most serious potential effects, like cancer, by getting yourself and your child vaccinated. **Most people who receive the HBV vaccine are immune for life.**

The HBV vaccine is available to anyone ages 59 or younger, as well as to people ages 60 and older who are at an increased risk of HBV exposure and were not vaccinated previously. **However, infants, babies, and children who contract HBV are 80-85% more likely to experience chronic HBV and its severe symptoms than adults who contract HBV.** Early vaccination is an essential step for lifelong liver health.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants receive their first dose of the HBV vaccine at birth. The birth dose is an essential part of preventing long-term HBV illness in infants. Babies can then complete the vaccine series between ages 6 and 18 months. Most people do not need a booster dose of the HBV vaccine later in life.

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The HBV vaccine is 90-95% effective at preventing chronic HBV infection. Like all vaccines, the HBV vaccine is continuously monitored for safety and effectiveness by government agencies and non-government health experts through various reporting systems, safety assessments, and collaborations.

What to Know About the HBV Vaccine

Getting the HBV vaccine at a very early age provides effective, lifelong protection against liver damage, liver failure, and liver cancer.

- **The HBV vaccine prevents serious illness from all types of transmission.** HBV is often thought of as a sexually transmitted disease, but it also travels in other ways, such as from a parent giving birth to their newborn. This is why the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants receive their first round of the HBV vaccine within 24 hours of birth. Often, people don't know they have HBV because they don't have symptoms. Even without symptoms, HBV can be transmitted and result in liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer, and death.
- **Giving newborns and babies the HBV vaccine is safe and effective.** The HBV vaccine has been in use since the 1980s with no evidence of safety concerns.
- **The HBV vaccine does not cause autism.** Getting the HBV vaccine may cause mild symptoms, including soreness and swelling at the site where the shot was given. However, studies have repeatedly found no link between autism and vaccines like the HBV vaccine or the vaccine preservative thimerosal.

HBV Vaccine Next Steps

Discuss any questions you have about HBV and the HBV vaccine with a healthcare provider. If your child hasn't yet received the HBV vaccine or did not complete the full vaccine series by 18 months old, consider scheduling an appointment with a healthcare provider to discuss next steps.