

Hepatitis B Virus Information Sheet

CONTRACTING THE DISEASE

The most common route of transmission of Hepatitis B virus is by transfer of virus-containing blood from one person to another. Persons such as doctors, dentists and laboratory workers who frequently come into contact with blood have the highest potential for contracting the disease.

The virus may also be found in body fluids other than blood. Hepatitis B may POTENTIALLY be found in breast milk, saliva, semen, vaginal secretions, cerebrospinal fluid, urine, and other body fluids, though there is no documentation of HBV transmission due to contact with these fluids. Contamination of these body fluids with blood is possible, however.

The most common methods of transmission include sexual intercourse, accidental inoculation, contamination of broken skin, or exposure of the mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, or mouth. Persons whose job responsibilities may require contact with these fluids or secretions should follow prudent work safety practices, such as wearing gloves and protective clothing, washing their hands, and possibly receiving immunization shots against the virus.

SYMPTOMS AND HEALTH EFFECTS

Approximately one-half of persons infected with Hepatitis B show no symptoms at all. Symptoms that do manifest include loss of appetite, low-grade fever, and joint pains. Later, jaundice may appear. A high percentage of patients recover completely, but in 5-10% of individuals, chronic infections may develop, some of which can cause fatal damage to the liver.

ASSESSING YOUR RISK OF EXPOSURE

Individual job responsibilities vary, including the frequency of exposure to human body fluids and the types of fluids involved. A person's risk of contracting Hepatitis B is also affected by his/her skill in performing job tasks, the person's level of education about the virus, and how diligent the worker is in taking necessary precautions.

Immunization against HBV does not guarantee complete protection against the virus (so workers who have been vaccinated should still practice safe work habits), but does provide a high level of protection. Booster shots after the original three-shot series may also be required. The most commonly reported side effect from HBV vaccination is temporary soreness at the injection site.

Remember: most people's risk of contracting Hepatitis B is considerably greater than that of contracting the AIDS virus. Workers who may potentially be exposed to HBV should carefully consider the facts about the disease and make a well-informed decision on whether or not to be vaccinated.