Hepatitis B Fact Sheet

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a serious infectious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. The hepatitis B virus can cause life-long infection that leads to cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, or liver failure. There is no cure for Hepatitis B, but the infection can be prevented by vaccination.

In 2007, there were an estimated 43,000 new Hepatitis B virus infections in the United States. However, the official number of reported Hepatitis B cases is much lower. Many people don’t know they are infected or may not have symptoms and therefore never seek the attention of medical or public health officials.

Risk for College Students

College students may be at higher risk for hepatitis B. The highest rate of disease occurs in individuals between the ages of 20 and 49. Living in close quarters, like a University residence hall, may increase the risk of exposure to carriers. College students may be exposed to the virus during sexual contact, through body piercings or tattoos, by sharing needles or razors and during contact sports. In addition, during college, students may travel abroad to areas where the disease is common.

Hepatitis B is contagious and spreads when the blood or other body fluids of a person with the virus are absorbed into an individual’s blood stream. The virus can live in all body fluids of an infected person, including blood, saliva, semen, and vaginal fluids. It can enter the body through cuts, tears, or abrasions and through mucous membranes of the mouth, vagina, anus, and eyes.

Symptoms of the Disease

Symptoms of hepatitis B can resemble the flu and may include fever, loss of appetite, low energy, joint pain, cramping, or nausea and vomiting, as well as jaundice (yellow skin or eyes). However, in about 30 percent of cases, hepatitis B causes no symptoms. Approximately one million people are chronic carriers of the disease, meaning they have no symptoms and may not know they are infected. However, they are still able to transmit the disease to others. Most people can manage symptoms of the disease with treatment, although 5 to 10 percent of the individuals become chronic carriers of the disease.

Vaccination Recommendations for College Students

A vaccine is available to help protect against hepatitis B. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends vaccination of everyone age 18 and under, and anyone at high risk for hepatitis B. The American College Health Association recommends that all college students be vaccinated. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recommends that all student-athletes be vaccinated.

About the Hepatitis B Vaccine

The hepatitis B vaccine is safe and effective. You cannot get the disease from the vaccine. The most common side effect of the vaccine is soreness at the site of the injection. Vaccination requires a series of three shots over a six-month period. After that, a booster shot is not necessary. The vaccine protects 96 percent of those who complete the three-dose vaccination series.

For more information

To learn more about hepatitis B and the vaccine, please contact your health care provider. For general information about hepatitis B among college students, visit the websites of the U. S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American College Health Association (ACHA).

www.cdc.gov
http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/B/bFAQ.htm#statistics
www.acha.org