

Frequently Asked Questions about Hep B in the African Community



What is Hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver.

How many different types of Hepatitis exist?

There are many causes of inflammation of the liver. Toxins, certain drugs, some diseases, alcohol, and infections such as from Hepatitis A, B & C can all cause hepatitis.

How can you get Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is transmitted through the blood or sexual fluids of someone who has Hepatitis B.

It can be transmitted from mother to child during childbirth, sex, medical procedures where there is lack of infection control, sharing of injection equipment, or sharing of personal items that may have infected blood such as razors or tattoo equipment.

What is the difference between Hepatitis Virus and HIV Virus?

Hepatitis B is a virus that affects the liver, which can lead to scarring of the liver tissue, liver cirrhosis, cancer, liver failure, or death if left untreated. Hepatitis B can be prevented with 3 doses of the Hepatitis B vaccine.

HIV is a completely different virus also transmitted by blood and sexual fluids that causes the immune system to become weak which makes it difficult for the body to fight off infections. There is no vaccine available to prevent HIV infection.

Is it curable?

Hepatitis B can be a temporary short infection, and clear on its own. Or Hepatitis B can develop into a chronic/long term infection. In very rare cases people can eliminate Hepatitis B even during the chronic phase, but once someone has chronic infection it is likely they will have it for their whole life. There is treatment to manage Hepatitis B so the virus has less chance to damage your liver.

Are medications currently available?

Yes, there are 5 antiviral medications. (lamivudine, adefovir dipivoxil; entecavir; telbivudine & tenofovir) and 2 injectable treatments (interferon alfa-2b & peginterferon alfa-2a)

Where are the medications available, and for how much?

Many medical providers treat Hepatitis B. There is low cost and free care and treatment options available through special grant funded programs and public hospitals.

Why do I have to inform others about it?

You are not required by law to tell others you have Hepatitis B, though it is highly recommended to protect the health of those who may be affected by your condition.

It is recommended that you encourage your sexual partner, household members, and immediate family members that you have hepatitis B so they can get tested, and then vaccinated if they are not infected and treated if they are infected. You can save lives by sharing this information with others. It would likely be very difficult for you if you do not tell and later on someone you care about develops serious liver health problems.

Who should I inform?

You should first inform your doctor to see if the virus is acute or chronic and to assess what your options are from there. Then you should tell your immediate family (children), household members and sexual partners so they can get tested and vaccinated to prevent infection. However, you are not obligated by law to tell anyone, and your health care provider cannot tell anyone without your consent.

What should I do because I do not know from where or who I got infected?

It may not be possible to know how you were infected. If possible, it is best to inform and have your family members and people who you may have had sexual contact with tested. The doctor will assess how far along the virus has progressed.

How do I have to transmit the message to protect others?

You are not obligated to tell others, but if you want to you can provide general education about the high risk for hepatitis B in the community and encourage testing and vaccination. You should protect others by ensuring no one comes into contact with your blood or sexual fluids. Never share personal items that may have blood on them and practice safer sex. Ensure your sexual partners and household members are vaccinated.

What and how should I tell others?

The most important thing is to be honest. You can tell people face to face privately, you can have a family member or health professional help support you in conveying your message, or you can tell someone anonymously online if you are not comfortable to reveal your identity (www.inspot.org).

You can offer them information about where to get tested, or vaccinated if they are not positive. Educate them on how it can be spread to others. Let them know that Hepatitis can be prevented, treated, but cannot be cured.

How do you think they are going to react to me?

Most people do not know very much about Hepatitis B, so it is likely they may need education or explanation. It is possible people may be surprised, or suspicious, concerned or angry.

If they understand, they should support how you feel and encourage you in ways to better your health. Ways to help them understand is to start with education and awareness about the Hepatitis virus. If you let them know that the reason you are telling them is so that they can protect themselves, it is likely they will be appreciative.

Do I have tell to my wife, girlfriend? Children?

You are not obligated by law to tell anyone, but you are strongly encouraged to tell your wife, girlfriend, and children so that they can also get tested. If they are positive, they can get treatment before the infection progresses. If they are negative, they can get the vaccine in order to prevent from getting the virus.

I am undocumented, what is going to happen to me if the Health Facilities discover it?

In NYC health care organizations do not ask about your citizenship status, and do not report cases to INS. Your hepatitis status has no impact on your immigration status.