

VIRAL HEPATITIS B

The liver is the largest organ in the body. It is located in the right upper abdomen, behind the ribs. It is a vital organ in the body. Some of its functions include storing energy; storing vitamins, iron, and minerals; producing proteins, including blood clotting factors; processing waste; producing bile, which is needed for food digestion; metabolizing medications and alcohol; and killing germs that enter the body through the gastrointestinal tract.

Hepatitis means the inflammation of or injury to the liver cells. Inflammation can often times occur due to viral infections.

Hepatitis may be either acute or chronic. In acute hepatitis, the inflammation develops quickly. Sometimes, the patient can usually recover completely, but it can take up to several months. Occasionally, however, the patient may fail to fully clear the viral infection so the infection becomes chronic. Chronic hepatitis can develop over time without the patient ever having symptoms or feeling sick. Chronic inflammation of the liver can lead to development of scar tissue. As scar tissue build up over time, the liver may progress to a serious condition known as cirrhosis, which can in turn lead to liver failure requiring liver transplant.

Hepatitis B is caused by hepatitis B virus. It is a serious global problem. Current estimates are that over 250,000 people in the United States contract this viral infection each year. It is estimated that there are more than 250 million HBV carriers in the world, of whom approximately 600,000 die annually from HBV-related liver disease. Approximately 15% to 25% of people with chronic Hepatitis B develop serious liver damage, including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Hepatitis B is usually spread when someone comes in contact with blood or bodily fluid from a person who has the disease. This can happen in a few ways, like having sex or sharing needles. Hepatitis B can also be passed from an infected mother to her baby at birth, or from a family member to young children.

Millions of people currently living with chronic Hepatitis B were infected as infants or during early childhood. These infections occurred before the vaccine was available and widely used. Chronic Hepatitis B is often “silent” and many people can go decades without symptoms. Up to two-thirds of Americans living with chronic Hepatitis B do not know they are infected.

Asian and Pacific Islanders (APIs) make up less than 5% of the total population in the United States, but account for more than 50% of Americans living with chronic Hepatitis B. Despite these high rates, many APIs are not tested for Hepatitis B. They are unaware of their infection and many recent immigrants do not have access to medical services that can help save lives. As a result, chronic Hepatitis B and associated liver cancer in APIs is one of the most serious health disparities in the United States.

SYMPTOMS

When people first get hepatitis B, they can feel like they have the flu. Some people’s eyes or skin turn yellow (called jaundice). These symptoms usually get better, but it can take weeks to months. However, most people with chronic hepatitis B have no symptoms. But, over time, the infection can lead to a liver condition called cirrhosis. Symptoms of cirrhosis may include swelling in the belly and legs, fluid build-up in the lungs, bruising or bleeding easily, confusion, and/or coma.

DIAGNOSIS

A blood test ordered by doctor can check for this viral infection. Your doctor might also want to remove a small sample of your liver to see if it is damaged. This is called a “biopsy.”

CDC recommends testing for the following groups:

- All people born in countries where Hepatitis B is common
- All people born in the United States, who were not vaccinated at birth, and who have at least one parent born in a country with high Hepatitis B rates
- People who live with someone with Hepatitis B

Testing identifies people living with chronic Hepatitis B and helps them access lifesaving medical care. This also helps find other people, such as household contacts, who may be at risk for getting the disease. For this reason, all pregnant women are screened for Hepatitis B.

TREATMENT

For people who have chronic hepatitis B, treatments typically includes medicines that fight the virus. There are several types. Your doctor will choose the right one for you. In severe cases, people with hepatitis B need a new liver, which is done by liver transplant. It is important to have an ultrasound test every 6 months to make sure they are not developing liver cancer. An ultrasound creates pictures of the inside of the body. People who are at risk for getting the disease should be vaccinated. The vaccine is highly successful at preventing new Hepatitis B cases, which is why all newborns are vaccinated.

Doctors of Comprehensive Digestive Institute of Nevada are experts in liver diseases, having previously managed large number of complex liver disease patients previously, as well as having multiple, internationally recognized publications on liver diseases, including publication on hepatitis B. Contact us today for an appointment.