

Hepatitis B Vaccine:

What Parents Need to Know

Anyone can get infected with hepatitis B virus (HBV), including your child. The hepatitis B vaccine is the best way to protect your child from becoming infected. Read on for more information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about how HBV is spread and why the hepatitis B vaccine is so important.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an infection of the liver. It is caused by HBV. Hepatitis B virus can cause lifelong HBV infection and can lead to liver cancer or permanent scarring of the liver (cirrhosis). More than 1 million people in the United States are living with lifelong HBV infection.

How is hepatitis B virus spread?

Hepatitis B virus is spread by blood or body fluids. Here are ways exposure to these fluids can happen.

- During birth (if the mother has HBV).
- Sharing personal items, such as razors and toothbrushes, with a person who is infected.
- Having unprotected sex with a person who is infected.
- Injecting or shooting drugs using a needle with infected blood. Infection through direct contact with infected blood may occur.
- Some children may also become infected with HBV while living in the same household as a person with a lifelong form of the infection.

Why is my child at risk?

You may feel your child will never be exposed to HBV in any of these ways. Here are some facts about HBV to think about.

- One-third of people who are infected with HBV in the United States don't know how they got it.
- Some people with HBV do not even know they are infected.
- A person, especially a child, with HBV may not feel or look sick.
- Nearly half of the more than 5,000 adult Americans who die of hepatitis B each year caught the infection during childhood.

People with HBV can pass it to those who are not protected. Immunizing your child against this virus will protect him or her now and when he or she is older and exposed to more people.

Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?

The hepatitis B vaccine is very safe. No serious reactions have been linked to this vaccine. Side effects are usually mild and include soreness where the shot was given and fussiness. Symptoms usually go away within 48 to 72 hours. Keep in mind that getting the vaccine against hepatitis B is much safer than getting the infection.

When should my child get the hepatitis B vaccine?

Your child needs at least 3 doses of hepatitis B vaccine to be fully protected. The recommended times to receive hepatitis B vaccine are

- At birth
- At 1 to 2 months of age
- At 6 to 18 months of age

Newborns should receive the first dose of vaccine within the first 24 hours of birth. Newborns who, for a medical reason or another reason, did not get the vaccine at birth should get the first dose as soon as possible and should complete all 3 doses at the recommended intervals. Children of mothers with hepatitis B infection should be tested for HBV after receiving all doses of the hepatitis B vaccine.

If a pregnant woman tests positive for HBV during routine prenatal screening or at the time of delivery, her newborn must receive the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine within 12 hours of birth. The second dose should be given at 1 month of age; the third dose, by 6 months of age. Immunoglobulin therapy may also be given to help strengthen the newborn's immune system. This decision will be made by the newborn's doctor at the time of delivery.

Older children or teens who have not been immunized and any unvaccinated person living with a person who is known to be infected by HBV should receive 3 doses of the vaccine to be protected against infection.

It's important that your child gets all 3 doses of the hepatitis B vaccine as recommended in the childhood immunization schedule. The vaccine is very effective. More than 95% of children who receive all the recommended doses of the vaccine are fully protected against the illnesses caused by HBV.

Who should not get the vaccine?

In rare cases, there are children who should not get the vaccine, including

- Children who had a severe allergic reaction to a previous dose of the vaccine. Such reactions are rare.
- Children who are more than mildly sick on the day the vaccination is scheduled. These children may need to wait until they are feeling better. Children with a minor cold, an upset stomach, or an ear infection can receive the hepatitis B vaccine safely.

Remember

Immunizations have protected children safely and effectively for years, but vaccines work only if your child is immunized.

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