



# Understanding Hepatitis B

Information for patients, families and people at risk. Helping you learn about hepatitis B and live well.



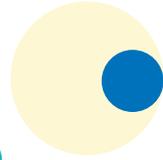
[www.kch.nhs.uk](http://www.kch.nhs.uk)

[www.hepbcompanion.org](http://www.hepbcompanion.org)

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# What is Hepatitis B?



**Hepatitis B (HBV) is a virus that infects the liver. It is found in blood and some body fluids. If it lasts more than six months, it is called chronic hepatitis B.**

Hepatitis B (HBV) is common worldwide. Many people first hear about it after a blood test. Millions of people live with it. You are not alone.

**Hepatitis B is often a ‘silent’ disease.** You may feel well and have no symptoms. Without tests and care, HBV can damage the liver.

Over time, this can cause scarring of the liver (called fibrosis). In some people, severe scarring (cirrhosis) can develop. HBV can also increase the risk of liver failure and, in some people, liver cancer.

The good news is that there are effective treatments that can control the virus and help you live a healthy, full life.

There is also a safe and effective vaccine to protect your family and close contacts. You will need regular check-ups with your doctor or liver specialist to see if, and when, you may need treatment.



**You are not alone. Millions of people live well and stay healthy with hepatitis B.**

# How hepatitis B spreads and how it does not

Hepatitis B spreads through contact with blood or certain body fluids from someone who has the virus. It does not spread through everyday contact.

**Hepatitis B can be prevented with the hepatitis B vaccine and safer behaviours.** We explain these below.

It can spread	It does not spread through
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● From mother to baby during birth</li><li>● Through sex without a condom</li><li>● By sharing needles or equipment for drugs, steroids, piercings or tattoos</li><li>● By sharing razors or toothbrushes</li><li>● Through blood contact, including through sharp instruments such as needlestick injuries</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Hugging, holding hands or kissing</li><li>● Coughing or sneezing</li><li>● Sharing food, plates, cutlery or cups</li><li>● Using the same toilet, bath or swimming pool</li><li>● Sweat or tears</li></ul>

## Protecting others:

- Ask your close family and sexual partners to get tested and vaccinated.
- Use condoms until your partner is fully vaccinated.

- Do not share needles or personal hygiene items such as razors or toothbrushes, as they may have blood on them.
- Cover cuts and clean any blood spills safely at home.
- Tell your dentist or healthcare team that you have hepatitis B.

## Pregnancy and your baby:

- Tell your midwife if you have hepatitis B.
- Your baby can get the hepatitis B vaccine soon after birth. This will protect them from getting the virus.
- Some mothers may be offered treatment late in pregnancy to lower the risk.
- Breastfeeding is safe if your baby is vaccinated and your nipples are not cracked or bleeding.
- Your maternity and liver teams will advise if any additional steps are needed to protect your baby.

## Who may be more at risk?

- People whose mother or close family member has hepatitis B.
- People from places where hepatitis B (HBV) is common, such as sub-Saharan Africa, East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe.
- Sexual partners of someone with hepatitis B.
- People who have sex without condoms with new partners or more than one partner.
- Men who have sex with men.
- People who inject drugs or share needles or equipment.
- People who had medical or dental care in a country where blood screening or infection control may be limited.



**If any of these apply to you, ask your GP or liver specialist for advice or a hepatitis B blood test.**

# Symptoms

Many people with hepatitis B have no symptoms. When symptoms happen, they may include:

## Common symptoms

- Feeling very tired
- Feeling sick or being sick
- Poor appetite
- Pain or discomfort under the right ribs (upper tummy)
- Yellow skin or eyes (jaundice)
- Dark urine (wee) and pale poo
- Joint or muscle aches
- A mild fever

If you are unsure or have any of these symptoms, speak to your GP for advice. A simple blood test can check for hepatitis B.

If you already have hepatitis B and notice new or worsening symptoms, contact your liver specialist or GP, even if the symptoms seem mild or normal for you.

**Please go to all your liver clinic appointments for blood tests and scans. Regular check-ups help spot problems early and keep your liver healthy.**

# Tests and monitoring

A blood test confirms hepatitis B. If the test stays positive for more than six months, it means chronic hepatitis B.

## What tests you may have

- **Blood tests** to check liver health and the amount of virus. These may include **HBsAg** (hepatitis B surface antigen, which confirms hepatitis B), **HBV DNA** (how much virus is in your blood), and liver enzymes such as **ALT** and **AST** (how healthy your liver is).

- **Checks for other infections** such as hepatitis C, hepatitis D and HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus).
- **A liver stiffness scan (FibroScan)**. This is a quick, painless scan on the skin over your liver that helps measure how much scarring (fibrosis) there is in your liver.
- **An ultrasound scan** to look for early signs of liver problems, including liver cancer risk. Ultrasound is offered every six months for some people, unless your specialist advises otherwise.

## How often

Most people have check-ups **about every six months**, unless your specialist advises a different schedule. You may need them more often if you are starting treatment or if there are any changes in your test results.

## What to expect in your clinic appointment

- Blood tests.
- A liver stiffness scan (FibroScan). Sometimes an ultrasound.
- Time with your liver doctor, nurse or pharmacist to explain your results and next steps.

### Tips for your visit:

- Bring a list of all your medicines, herbal remedies and supplements.
- Tell us if you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.
- Write questions you would like to ask your doctor about hepatitis B.

**Please go to all your appointments.** If you cannot attend, rebook as soon as you can. If you are unsure about testing or follow-up, speak to your GP or liver specialist for advice.

# Phases of hepatitis B

Hepatitis B can be quiet at times and more active at other times. Doctors group your test results into phases. A phase is not permanent. It can change over time.

## The main ideas

- Some people do not need treatment now. **You still need regular check-ups.**
- If the virus is active, treatment may be needed to protect your liver.
- **Do not stop any hepatitis B medicine** unless your specialist tells you to.

## Common patterns you may hear about

### Quiet or low active phase

Your liver tests are in the healthy range and the virus level is low. You usually do not need treatment, but you still need check-ups.

### Active phase

Your liver tests may be high and the virus level is higher. You may need treatment to lower the risk of liver damage.

### Up and down phase

Results can change. The virus level (HBV DNA) can go up and down over time. You may feel well even when the virus is active, so it is important to keep all appointments.

### After clearing hepatitis B

A small number of people later clear hepatitis B. This means a blood marker called HBsAg (hepatitis B surface antigen) is no longer detected. Your liver team will explain what follow-up you still need.

## What this means for you

- ✓ Keep all your check-ups and blood tests.
- ✓ Ask your nurse or doctor which phase you are in and what it means for you.
- ✓ Tell your close family and sexual partners to get tested and vaccinated if they have not done so yet.
- ✓ If you are on treatment, take it every day as prescribed.

# Hepatitis B treatment

There is no complete cure yet. Treatment controls the virus and protects your liver. Keep taking your current treatment as prescribed. **New treatments are being developed**, offering hope for a future cure.

## Who needs treatment

**Not everyone needs medicine.** Your liver specialist will decide using your blood tests, scans and medical history. You will still need regular check-ups.

## Medicines used

- Tenofovir or entecavir are common daily tablets.
- Interferon injections are used in some cases for a set time.

Your liver specialist will choose the safest option for you.

## Taking your medicine

- ✓ Take it every day as prescribed.
- ✓ Keep taking it even if you feel well.
- ✓ Store it safely and do not share it with anyone.

## If you miss a dose

Take it when you remember. If it is close to your next dose, skip the missed one and take the next dose at the usual time. **Do not take two doses at once.**

If you are not sure, ask your pharmacist, GP or liver team.

## Side effects and when to get help

Most people do well on treatment. Some have mild side effects such as headache, tummy upset or feeling tired. These often improve.

**Speak to your GP or liver team if side effects do not settle.** Seek urgent help if you feel very unwell.

## Other medicines and supplements

Before starting any new medicine, supplement, or herbal remedy, ask your doctor or pharmacist. Some products can affect your liver or interact with hepatitis B treatment.



**If you need chemotherapy or strong immunosuppression, your team may give you temporary antiviral medicine to prevent hepatitis B reactivation.**

## Pregnancy and breastfeeding

If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, tell your liver team. Safe options are available in pregnancy. Your baby can have the hepatitis B vaccine soon after birth. Breastfeeding is safe if your nipples are not cracked or bleeding and your baby is vaccinated.

## Stopping treatment

Do not stop your hepatitis B medicine unless your specialist tells you to. Stopping suddenly can make the virus flare and harm your liver.

## Monitoring while on treatment

You will have regular blood tests and scans to check your liver and how well the medicine is working. Keep all your clinic appointments.

# Living well with hepatitis B

You can live well with hepatitis B. Small daily habits help protect your liver.

## Look after your liver

- ✔ Avoid alcohol or keep it very low. Ask your liver team what is safe for you.
- ✔ Avoid smoking.
- ✔ Eat well: plenty of vegetables, fruit, whole grains, beans, fish and lean meats.
- ✔ Limit sugary drinks, sweets, salty foods and foods high in saturated fat.
- ✔ Stay active. Aim for regular gentle exercise and good sleep.
- ✔ Avoid raw or undercooked shellfish.
- ✔ Ask your GP or liver team about the hepatitis A vaccine if you are not already immune. This protects your liver from another virus that can cause inflammation and damage.

## Medicines safety

- Take only medicines that you need and as directed.
- Before starting any new medicine, herbal remedy or supplement, ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. Some products can harm the liver or interact with hepatitis B treatment.
- If you are on hepatitis B treatment, take it every day. Do not stop unless your specialist tells you to.

## Everyday life

- Hepatitis B does not spread through normal daily contact, work, school or sport.
- At home, keep personal hygiene items separate, cover cuts and clean any blood spills safely.
- If you inject drugs, never share needles or equipment. Ask for support from local services or your GP.

## Pregnancy and family planning

- If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, tell your liver team early.
- Your baby can be protected with the hepatitis B vaccine at birth.

# Feelings, relationships and everyday life

You are not alone. Many people live well with hepatitis B.

Hepatitis B does not stop you enjoying life, having relationships, working or feeling the same emotions as anyone else.

This section can help with your feelings, talking to others and intimacy. You choose who to tell.

## Your feelings

- Feeling worried, shocked or upset is common.
- Talk to someone you trust. This could be a friend, a family member or your nurse or doctor.
- If low mood, anxiety or sleep problems do not improve, ask your GP for support. You can also join an hepatitis B support group to share and learn from others, such as the patient-led group run jointly by Hep B Companion and King's College Hospital.

## Talking to others

- You choose who to tell.
- You should tell your sexual partner(s) and close family, so they can get tested and vaccinated.
- Tell your dentist and any healthcare team who look after you.
- You do not need to tell people at work or school unless you want to. If your job involves contact with blood or sharp instruments, speak to your occupational health team for advice.
- If you are worried about your safety or privacy, speak to your GP or liver team before you tell someone.

## Intimacy and relationships

- You can have close relationships.
- Use condoms with sexual partners. Condoms protect against hepatitis B and other sexually transmitted infections. This is especially important until your partner has been tested and fully vaccinated.
- Kissing, hugging and everyday contact are safe.

## At home

- Hepatitis B does not spread through normal daily contact.
- Keep personal items like razors and toothbrushes separate.
- Cover cuts and clean any blood spills safely.
- Ask family members who live with you to get tested and vaccinated if they have not already done so.

## Stigma and confidence

- Hepatitis B is common worldwide. Having hepatitis B is nothing to be ashamed of.
- Learn the facts and share them. This reduces fear and stigma.
- Bring this leaflet to appointments and write down your questions.

# Research into HBV treatment at King's

King's College Hospital runs hepatitis B research and clinical trials. Some trials test new medicines. Other research looks at improving current treatments or developing better blood tests.

If you would like to know more about ongoing hepatitis B research studies, speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist at your next liver appointment, or email the liver trials team at: [kch-tr.livertrials@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.livertrials@nhs.net)

## What a trial may involve

- Extra clinic visits or tests, such as blood tests.
- Sometimes trying a trial medicine for a set time.
- Your liver team will check which studies may suit you.

# Quick questions and answers (FAQ)

## **1. Do I need treatment for hepatitis B?**

Not everyone needs medicine. Your liver specialist decides using your blood tests and scans. You will still need regular check-ups.

## **2. How do I protect my family and partner?**

Ask close family and sexual partner(s) to get tested and vaccinated. Use condoms. Do not share razors or toothbrushes. Cover cuts and clean any blood spills safely.

## **3. Can I have sex, kiss and share a home?**

Yes. Condoms protect against hepatitis B and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Kissing, hugging and everyday contact are safe. Keep personal items like razors and toothbrushes separate.

## **4. Is there a cure?**

There is no complete cure yet. Treatment can control the virus and protect your liver. Research and clinical trials are moving forward. Keep taking your current treatment as prescribed. New treatments are being developed, offering hope for a future cure.

## **5. I feel well. Do I still need check-ups?**

Yes. Hepatitis B is often a silent disease. Most people have check-ups about every six months, unless your specialist advises a different schedule. Please go to all your appointments. If you cannot attend, rebook as soon as you can.

## **6. I am pregnant or planning a pregnancy. What should I do?**

Tell your liver team early. Safe options are available in pregnancy. Your baby can get the hepatitis B vaccine soon after birth. Breastfeeding is safe if your nipples are not cracked or bleeding and your baby is vaccinated.

# More information and useful contacts

It is important to look for information from trusted medical sources.

The websites below offer reliable, up-to-date guidance and support about hepatitis B.

## In the UK

- **Hep B Companion:** [www.hepbcompanion.org](http://www.hepbcompanion.org)
- **NHS – Hepatitis B overview:** [www.nhs.uk/conditions/hepatitis-b](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hepatitis-b)
- **British Liver Trust:** [www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk)
- **King’s College Hospital:** [www.kch.nhs.uk](http://www.kch.nhs.uk)
- **Hepatitis & Liver Channel (YouTube):** Watch hepatitis B information videos in multiple languages on:

 <http://www.youtube.com/@HepatitisLiverChannel>

## International resources

- **Hepatitis B Foundation:** [www.hepb.org](http://www.hepb.org)
- **World Health Organization (WHO):** [www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/hepatitis-b](http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/hepatitis-b)



### Tip:

Always check that online health information comes from trusted organisations such as the NHS, Hep B Companion, recognised liver charities, or leading global health agencies.

## Liver Clinic - King's College Hospital

If you have any queries or concerns, you can speak to your doctor, nurse or pharmacist in the specialist liver clinic.

**Admin team:** 020 3299 5802 - [kch-tr.hepatitisadmin@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.hepatitisadmin@nhs.net)

**Nursing team:** [kch-tr.HEPCNS@nhs.net](mailto:kch-tr.HEPCNS@nhs.net)

## MyChart

Our MyChart app and website lets you securely access parts of your health record with us, giving you more control over your care.

To sign up or for help, call us on **020 3299 4618** or email [kings.mychart@nhs.net](mailto:kings.mychart@nhs.net). Visit [www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart](http://www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart) to find out more.

## PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams. The PALS office is on the ground floor of the Hambleton Wing, near the main entrance on Bessemer Road - staff will be happy to direct you.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: **020 3299 4618**

Email: [kings.pals@nhs.net](mailto:kings.pals@nhs.net)

**If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Interpreting and Accessible Communication Support on 020 3299 4618 or email [kings.access@nhs.net](mailto:kings.access@nhs.net)**

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