Hepatitis

Hepatitis B Prevention

The best way to prevent hepatitis B is to be vaccinated. Two HBV vaccines are available: Recombivax HB and Engerix-B. Both of these vaccines require three injections administered over a six-month period. The side effects of the hepatitis B vaccine are usually mild and may include soreness at the injection site and mild flu-like symptoms.

A combined hepatitis A (HAV) and HBV vaccine is available (Twinrix), which also requires three injections administered over a six-month period but offers the added advantage of protecting against both viral infections. Other combination vaccines include Comvax (active against HBV and Haemophilus influenzae type b) and Pediarix (active against HBV, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough [pertussis] and poliovirus).

The HBV vaccine is generally effective for more than 90 percent of adults and children who receive all three doses. People with compromised immune systems may be less likely to develop immunity to HBV through vaccination.

If you do not think you were ever infected with hepatitis B, talk to your health care provider. The vaccine is recommended for:

- All infants, beginning at birth
- All children 18 years old or younger who have not been vaccinated previously
- Sex partners or household contacts of individuals who are HBsAg positive
- Sexually active people who are not in long-term, mutually monogamous relationships (for example, more than one sex partner during the previous six months)
- Anyone seeking evaluation or treatment for a sexually transmitted infection
- Men who have sex with men
- Injection drug users
- People with hepatitis C virus and other chronic liver diseases
- People with jobs in which there is a risk of infection (such as emergency medical technicians, doctors and nurses)

- Residents and staff of facilities for developmentally disabled individuals
- Travelers to regions with moderate or high rates of HBV infection
- Hemodialysis patients
- People living with HIV
- All other persons seeking protection against HBV

If you have not been vaccinated against hepatitis B, you can still take steps to prevent HBV infection. These include using a condom or another type of latex barrier while having sex. If you are an injection drug user and share equipment, cleaning your syringes with bleach will not help you avoid hepatitis B—but it's always best to use new needles to prevent the risk of HBV infection. Also, don't share items that may have been contaminated with someone else's blood, such as toothbrushes, razors and needles used for body piercing, tattooing or acupuncture.

If you have not been vaccinated against hepatitis B and fear that you were recently exposed to HBV—for example, after being poked with a used hypodermic needle or having sexual contact with a person with hepatitis B—it is possible to receive a single injection of hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG) to help contain the infection. HBIG is recommended following exposure to hepatitis B virus because it provides immediate, short-term protection against the virus. A dose of the hepatitis B vaccine is given at the same time. Two additional doses of hepatitis B vaccine are given to complete the series and ensure long-term protection.

For more information and support for people living with, and at risk for, hepatitis B, please visit our sister site Hep.

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