

Hepatitis B – Vaccination protects

In Switzerland each year, some 2,000-3,000 people - mainly the young - become infected with hepatitis B. A very effective vaccine against this infection has been available for years.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is an inflammation of the liver, which is transmitted by viruses. Only one in three people with the infection notice clear signs of liver inflammation, such as jaundice with yellow discoloration of the skin and eyes, brown urine and pale stools. Chronic liver inflammation develops in about 10% of those infected.

What is so dangerous about hepatitis B?

At the present time, some 20,000 persons are affected by chronic hepatitis in Switzerland. Many chronic hepatitis carriers have no visible signs of disease. Their illness can therefore be transmitted to other people, initially entirely unnoticed.

When the disease becomes fully developed, however, it is too late for vaccination, and no effective treatment for hepatitis is yet available.

In Switzerland each year, about 20 - 50 people die of chronic hepatitis B, which can terminate in total destruction of the liver or in liver cancer.

How is hepatitis B transmitted?

The hepatitis B virus is transmitted in all body fluids, but especially in the blood. It is regarded as highly contagious. Adolescents and young adults are particularly commonly infected. **The commonest routes of infection are:**

- *Sexual intercourse with an infected partner*
- *Drug injection with unsterile needles*
- *Tattooing or piercing with unsterile instruments*
- *Close physical contact with an infected person*
- *Transmission at birth from an infected mother*

There is no risk of infection when infected blood comes into contact with unbroken skin, or through eating or drinking (unlike in the case of hepatitis A).

How can you protect yourself?

An effective vaccine has been available for some years now, and this is recommended for all Swiss adolescents aged between 11 and 15 years, since they are just entering the age group with the highest risk of infection (20 to 24 years). Two injections of the vaccine are given into the upper arm over the course of 6 months. As a rule this provides lifelong protection. In one out of ten vaccinated individuals, a harmless reaction may occur in the form of transient pain or reddening of the skin at the injection site. Severe side effects are very rare.

Please ask your school doctor or family doctor for advice.

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