

Information for people with HIV

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The risks of Hepatitis B

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This booklet is part of a range of publications produced by Terrence Higgins Trust to support you in living well with HIV.

Most of the publications in this range, such as this one, are designed to be suitable for you as a person with HIV, whatever your race, nationality, gender or sexuality.

Written by Andy Cooper

This project has been made possible as part of the Treatment Information Providers Initiative, which is funded by the London HIV Commissioning Consortium, together with an educational grant from Bristol-Myers Squibb Pharmaceuticals Ltd.



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This booklet is for you if you are living with HIV and have concerns about Hepatitis B. The aim of this booklet is to highlight Hepatitis B transmission and vaccination easing the concerns that some people may have.

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis is a general term, which means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis B is a viral infection, which is sometimes called Hep B.

How is it transmitted?

The main ways that Hepatitis B is passed from one person to another is through blood, semen, saliva, vaginal fluid or from mother to baby. Most people affected in the UK are gay men, people who share needles and drug equipment and people who work in health care. As Hepatitis B is much more infectious than HIV it is much easier to pass from one person to another.

How do I know if I have Hepatitis B?

If you think that you may be at risk of having Hepatitis B, ask at your HIV clinic about testing to see if you have been infected. Signs that you are infected with Hepatitis B may vary from person to person and in some cases may not be noticeable. Those who do show symptoms may experience yellowing of the eyes and skin, stomach-ache, sickness, joint pain and loss of appetite.

What about the longer term effects?

Most people who become infected with Hepatitis B will recover as their immune system manages to deal with the infection. They are said to have immunity to Hepatitis B. Being HIV positive reduces your chances of being able to deal with infection and the risk of becoming a chronic carrier of Hepatitis B is increased.

If you are a chronic carrier of Hep B, left untreated, the long-term effects can be very serious and life threatening, leading to severe liver damage.

What can I do to protect myself?

If you think that you may be at risk from Hepatitis B, it is advisable to be vaccinated giving you greater protection. Although the vaccine is not always as successful in people with HIV, it can still be effective in most cases.

Only vaccination gives real protection against Hepatitis B, although the use of condoms can reduce the risk of transmission during sex. The vaccination is safe, free and involves three injections.

Usually, the three injections are given over a period of six months, with the first injection in month one, the second injection in month three and the third injection in month six. Some vaccination courses involve three injections over a shorter time - check with your HIV clinic for details.

You need to have all three injections to make sure you are fully protected. If you are late for a follow-up injection, you won't have to start the course from scratch but it is worth remembering that you won't get full protection from Hepatitis B until you get your final shot.

Before vaccination you might need to have a blood test to check if you've already had Hepatitis B (in which case you are immune and don't need to be vaccinated). A blood test after your last injection checks that the vaccine has worked.

After five years you should have another blood test to check if the protection has worn off, and you might then need a 'booster' injection to protect you again. Being HIV positive can have an effect on how long you remain protected. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any concerns.



I have Hepatitis B - is there any treatment?

A blood test will show if you have been exposed to Hepatitis B, this will also show whether you have successfully developed immunity. If you are infected and are still carrying Hepatitis B there are treatments available. Some anti-HIV drugs have been found to be effective against Hepatitis B.

What are the effects of having HIV and Hepatitis B?

Although there doesn't seem to be any effect on HIV by also having Hepatitis B your health may need to be checked more regularly. As someone with HIV there is already a chance that your immune system is affected, because of this the speed that Hepatitis B can damage the liver may be greater and the damage more severe.

The treatment for Hepatitis B has to be balanced with any anti-HIV drugs that you may be taking and this can be a very delicate balancing act organised by you and your doctor.

Because of this it's important to be treated by a doctor who has good knowledge of both Hepatitis B and HIV or two doctors that will work closely together to ensure that you receive the best treatment.

For more information on living with HIV, the risks of Hepatitis B and sexually transmitted infections see the Terrence Higgins Trust website or contact THT Direct Helpline. Further information about Hepatitis B, transmission, treatment and long term effects can be found on the websites listed.



THT DIRECT > 0845 12 21 200

www.tht.org.uk

www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

www.hepinfo.org

This is the new Terrence Higgins Trust created website for gay men containing information on Hepatitis A, B and C.

The HIV & AIDS charity for life

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Design **Felton Communication** 020 7405 0900 Ref: 9550 Illustration: Oliver Gaiger