

Hepatitis B – Risk in travellers



Hepatitis B is a serious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver.

The hepatitis B virus is transmitted through contact with blood or body fluids from an infected person.

Most tourists and short-term travellers are generally considered to be at low risk of catching hepatitis B. However the risk of infection may increase with certain behaviour and activities, particularly if you are a frequent or long term-traveller. Expatriates, those travelling for medical reason or with medical conditions and those visiting friends or relatives are also at increased risk of infection, especially in countries where hepatitis B is highly prevalent.

Where is hepatitis B prevalent?

Hepatitis B is present worldwide, but is more prevalent in some countries than others. High prevalence regions are those where at least 8% of the population are chronically infected, and include sub-Saharan Africa, most of Asia, and the Pacific islands. Parts of Eastern Europe, Greenland and some of rural Northern Canada also have a high prevalence.

How can you catch hepatitis B?

Transmission of the virus occurs when blood or body fluids (such as semen) from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. The virus is highly contagious, which means that it can be passed on after exposure to a very small amount of contaminated blood or body fluids. The main ways that you could be at risk are:

- By having unprotected sex (oral, vaginal or anal) with an infected person; this includes men who have sex with men.
- From exposure to infected blood, for example:
 - from contaminated instruments used during medical and dental procedures, acupuncture, body piercing, tattoos, and face or head shaving
 - by sharing needles or syringes when injecting drugs
 - through blood transfusions (donated blood is screened in the UK for viruses such as hepatitis B, but this may not be the case in some other countries)
 - through injuries sustained during contact sports
 - healthcare workers can be at risk from needle stick injuries (an accidental prick from an infected needle) where the needle has been used on an infected person
 - a pregnant woman with hepatitis B can pass it to her baby, or it can be passed from child to child

What are the symptoms?

Not everyone develops symptoms, but if you do experience symptoms it might take two or three months for them to appear after exposure to the virus.

Symptoms of the disease include nausea and vomiting, lack of interest in food, abdominal pain, and possibly a mild fever. You may also become jaundiced (yellowing of the skin and eyes) which is a sign of liver damage.

Most adults recover with no long term problems but some go on to develop severe liver damage which could be life threatening.

Some people might continue to carry the virus but remain unaware that they have contracted hepatitis B. This is called chronic hepatitis B. Chronic carriers of hepatitis B remain infectious to others and are at risk of progressive liver disease, which develops over many years, potentially resulting in cirrhosis or liver cancer. Children infected at birth or in childhood are more likely to become a chronic carrier than those infected as an adult.

Prevention

Before you go:

Book an appointment with your doctor or nurse for a pre-travel consultation at least 6 weeks before you are due to travel.

A vaccine is available for travellers considered to be at risk of hepatitis B. Talk to your healthcare provider for advice about vaccination against hepatitis B and other diseases for your chosen destination. Remember that even if you have already had a particular vaccination you may now need a booster.

If you are travelling abroad for medical treatment it is important to realise that standards of care in some countries may differ to that in the UK, and there may be a risk of diseases such as hepatitis B, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C during medical procedures. Ensure your healthcare provider is aware you are travelling for medical treatment so they can advise you appropriately.

Travel insurance

It is important that you take out adequate travel and health insurance as an emergency abroad can be extremely expensive. Always declare any existing conditions and be aware that travel insurance may exclude treatment of such conditions. Ensure that the cost of repatriation is included in your insurance. Standard travel insurance is unlikely to cover any extra costs associated with travel for medical treatment so it is important to advise the insurance company of your plans.

Further information regarding health insurance and travel is provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) online (www.fco.gov.uk).

During the trip:

Using precautions to protect you against hepatitis B will also help to protect you against other blood and body fluid borne viruses, such as HIV and hepatitis C, for which there are no available vaccines.

Practice safe sex – use a condom

Don't share needles

Avoid body piercing, tattoos and acupuncture

Take care on the roads or when participating in activities

Carry a sterile medical kit

Follow precautions if you intend to work in a dental, medical or high risk setting

After your trip:

If you needed hepatitis B vaccine before you travelled make sure that you receive any further doses that may be required on your return; it is important to complete the full course of vaccines.

What should you do if you think you could have been exposed to the virus?

If you found yourself in a situation on holiday where you could have been exposed to the virus, make an appointment as soon as possible to discuss this with your doctor or nurse.

Further information for travellers regarding hepatitis B is available from the Health Protection Agency at: <http://www.nathnac.org/travel/index.htm>

Information on staying safe and healthy abroad can be obtained from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) at: <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/staying-safe/>

This leaflet has been prepared by Sanofi Pasteur MSD to provide general information on issues relating to healthy travel. It is not meant as an alternative to individual advice and should be used in conjunction with advice provided for you by a health care professional.

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