

Communicable Diseases

Hepatitis B Vaccine

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Vaccines (also called “needles” or “baby shots”) are the best way to protect against some very serious infections. The Canadian Paediatric Society and the National Advisory Committee on Immunization strongly recommend routine immunization.

The Hepatitis B vaccine is given to Ontario children when they are in Grade 7. The vaccination series for 11-15 year olds is two doses four to six months apart. People younger than 11 years, or older than 15 years need to receive three doses of Hepatitis B vaccine (one month after first dose and six months after first dose).

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a virus that affects your liver. Half of the people who become infected do not have any symptoms and feel fine. Symptoms may include nausea, fever, fatigue, dark-coloured urine, abdominal pain, enlarged liver and jaundice (yellow colour of skin and eyes). A small number of people with Hepatitis B can die from the initial infection. About 10% develop a lifelong infection which can lead to scarring and cancer of the liver later in life. They are called carriers because they can still spread the infection.

Hepatitis B can only be spread from person to person when body fluids of an infected person come in contact. Examples of how it can spread are:

- having unprotected sex with an infected person
- sharing needles or other equipment for injection drug use
- transmission from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth
- sharing needles, ink, or other equipment for tattoos or body piercing
- needle stick injuries in healthcare workers
- blood splashes on the eye, nose, mouth or broken skin
- sharing razors, nail scissors, or toothbrushes of an infected person
- rarely, though possible, through human bites from an infected person

Who should receive the Hepatitis B vaccine?

There is no age limit on who can receive the Hepatitis B vaccine. Anyone who would like to decrease their risk of acquiring Hepatitis B should get the vaccine.

Anyone who is at increased risk of being infected with Hepatitis B should receive the vaccine. High risk groups include:

- health care workers
- infants born to mothers who are infected with Hepatitis B
- non-immune or non-infected sexual and household contacts of someone infected with Hepatitis B
- persons on renal dialysis and those with diseases requiring frequent receipt of blood products
- persons awaiting liver transplants or those with chronic liver disease
- intravenous drug users
- men who have sex with men
- those with needle stick injuries

How well does Hepatitis B vaccine protect me and my child?

The Hepatitis B vaccine is more than 90% effective in preventing Hepatitis B infection for those who receive the total recommended doses. The effectiveness of your vaccination series can be checked with a simple blood test. It is recommended that you wait to be tested at least one month after receiving your last dose of vaccine.

Is the Hepatitis B vaccine safe?

Yes, serious side effects are rare. Mild pain, swelling and redness for a few days are common at the spot where the needle was given. Some people get a fever, lose their appetite or are drowsy for a day or two after the vaccination.

Call your family health care provider or local hospital if your child has any of the following within three days of getting the needle:

- high fever (over 40°C or 104°F)
- crying for more than three hours
- convulsions or seizures
- very pale color and serious drowsiness
- hives (itchy rash)
- swelling of the face or mouth
- trouble breathing
- other serious problems

Who should not get the Hepatitis B vaccine?

Your family health care provider may decide not to give your child's needle or may give a different vaccine if your child has:

- a high fever or serious infection worse than a cold
- had an allergic reaction to a previous dose of Hepatitis B vaccine
- a severe allergy to any parts of the vaccine such as: yeast, aluminum hydroxide, polysorbate (Engerix), formaldehyde (Recombivax only), thimerosal (mercury), Latex (Recombivax only)
- people known to be a carrier of Hepatitis B surface antigen or immune from disease do not require the Hepatitis B vaccine
- Hepatitis B vaccine is not routinely given to pregnant women. Before receiving the vaccine when pregnant discuss the risk and benefits with your health care provider.

Whom should I talk to if I have any more questions about the Hepatitis B vaccine?

Talk to your family health care provider or the Huron County Health Unit (519-482-3416) for more information.

Your Record of Protection

After you or your child receives any immunization, make sure the doctor updates the yellow personal Immunization Record card. Keep it in a safe place!