

Infant hepatitis B

Immunisation information

The National Immunisation Program provides free hepatitis B vaccine to infants shortly after birth.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious disease that can be contracted throughout life. It is caused by a virus that affects the liver. Babies who get this disease may only have mild symptoms, or have no symptoms at all. However, up to 90 per cent of those infected as babies will have the virus in their bloodstream for life and may be able to pass it on to other people. As many as 25 per cent of people chronically infected with hepatitis B may develop liver cancer or liver failure later in life.

How is hepatitis B spread?

Hepatitis B virus is spread in the blood, sexual secretions or saliva of a hepatitis B infected person by:

- sharing drug injecting equipment
- sharps injury
- sharing razors, toothbrushes etc
- sexual contact
- mother to baby at birth
- child to child, usually through open sores or wounds.

Can hepatitis B be prevented?

Yes, hepatitis B can be prevented. The most important and effective way of preventing hepatitis B is immunisation. Hepatitis B vaccine can be safely given to babies shortly after birth and through infancy.

Why does my baby need to be immunised?

It is important to start the hepatitis B immunisation as soon as possible after birth to ensure that the immunisation is as effective as possible and offers protection from hepatitis B throughout infancy and early childhood when the risk of becoming chronically infected is high.



Why introduce infant hepatitis B immunisation?

Expert medical bodies such as the National Health and Medical Research Council strongly recommend this vaccine as part of a long-term prevention strategy to reduce the amount of hepatitis B disease in our community, to reduce the illness and death from complications due to the disease and to eventually eliminate hepatitis B from Australia. Babies will receive hepatitis B immunisation free as part of the routine childhood immunisation schedule.

Tell me more about infant hepatitis B immunisation

Before or soon after you have your baby, your doctor or midwife will discuss hepatitis B immunisation with you and will ask you to make a decision about whether you want your baby immunised. If you choose to have your baby immunised the birth dose will be given as soon as the baby is stable, preferably within 24 hours of birth and up to seven days of age.

Your baby will need three more doses of the hepatitis B vaccine to be fully immunised. These will be given at two, four and six months of age in combination with your baby's other routine childhood immunisations so your baby will not receive any additional needles.

The hepatitis B vaccines used in Australia contain a genetically engineered part of the virus and a small amount of an aluminium salt. You cannot catch hepatitis B from the vaccine.

What if my baby is born early?

Preterm babies, less than 32 weeks gestation or less than 2000 grams birth weight, do not respond as well as term babies do to hepatitis B vaccines. These babies require a booster dose of hepatitis B vaccine at 12 months of age to ensure that they have adequate protection against hepatitis B disease.

Will the vaccine affect breastfeeding?

Extensive experience indicates that the birth dose of hepatitis B vaccine does not interfere with either the establishment or maintenance of breastfeeding.

Possible side effects of hepatitis B vaccine

Common side effects

The most common side effects of the vaccine are minor and disappear quickly.

These include:

- soreness, redness and swelling at the injection site
- mild fever
- a temporary small lump at the injection site.

Extremely rare side effect

- Anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction).

If you are concerned about your baby's health after immunisation consult a doctor or nurse.

Pre-immunisation checklist

Immunisation should be deferred if your child is unwell. Speak to your doctor or nurse.

Before your child is immunised, tell the doctor or nurse if any of the following apply:

- Is unwell on the day of immunisation
- Has any severe allergies.

Any more questions?

For more information about the hepatitis B infant immunisation program speak to your doctor or nurse.

Further information

www.health.vic.gov.au/immunisation

www.immunise.health.gov.au



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Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 50 Lonsdale St, Melbourne.

© Department of Health, December 2013 (1312009) PH028



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