

Hepatitis B

Immunisation Information

The Immunisation Schedule provides free hepatitis B vaccine for infants shortly after birth and at 2 months, 4 months and 12 months. Year 7 students also receive hepatitis B vaccine if a course has not previously been completed.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a virus that causes serious infection. It is carried in the blood and affects the liver and can cause fever, nausea, tiredness, dark urine and yellow skin.

All children at risk of hepatitis B should be protected against this disease. In extreme cases hepatitis B can destroy the liver and cause death. Other people can be infected with the virus and "carry" it for a long time (even for life) without knowing. These people are in danger of developing cancer of the liver and cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver later in life. Both of these diseases can kill. People who "carry" hepatitis B virus may infect other healthy people with the virus.

In Australia, the rate of diagnosed hepatitis B infection has increased dramatically over the last 20 years with many thousands of people chronically infected. Rates of infection amongst adolescents and young adults are at least five times the national average.

Hepatitis B virus is usually spread through the blood of an infected person or from mother to child at birth. At an older age the virus can be spread through such activities as unsafe sex, injecting drug use, tattooing or body piercing, using unsterilised equipment and contact sports when there are cuts or grazes.

There is no cure for hepatitis B infection once you have caught it.

Hepatitis B Immunisation

Children born on or after 1 May 2000 will commence the new schedule. They will receive hepatitis B vaccine shortly after the baby is born and while in hospital. Further doses of the course of hepatitis B vaccine will be given at 2, 4 and 12 months of age as a combined vaccine Hib (Haemophilus influenzae type B/hepatitis B (Comvax)). The combined vaccine contains a PedvaxHIB vaccine component.

All children born before 1 May 2000 will complete the old immunisation schedule. The hepatitis B course for these children includes an initial dose, a second dose is given four weeks later and a third dose is given six months after the initial dose.

The vaccine is now offered free to all children in Year 7 at school. A two dose course of adult hepatitis B vaccine has now been approved for adolescents aged 11-15 years and involves the administration of two doses given 4 - 6 months apart. Vaccination is not necessary in Year 7 if a course of hepatitis B vaccine has been previously completed.

The vaccines used in Australia contain a genetically engineered part of the virus, a small amount of an aluminium salt and a preservative.

Comparison of Effects of the Vaccine and the Disease

Possible Side Effects of Hepatitis B Vaccination

Most side effects are minor and quickly disappear. The following reactions are not common, and if they occur, it will be soon after the immunisation:

- Low grade fever.
- Soreness, redness and swelling in the area where the injection was given.
- Nausea.
- Feeling unwell.
- Joint pain.

If these mild reactions do occur, the side effects can be reduced by:

- Taking extra fluids to drink.
- Not overdressing.
- Applying a cold wet cloth on the sore injection site.
- Taking paracetamol to reduce any discomfort (note the recommended dose for the age of your child).

If reactions are severe or persistent, or if you are worried about your child, contact your doctor or hospital.

Effects of Hepatitis B Disease

About 1 in 3 chronic carriers will develop cirrhosis or liver cancer.

Pre-immunisation Checklist

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

- Are unwell on the day of immunisation. (temperature over 38.5°C)
- Have had a severe reaction to any vaccine.

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution of the Department of Health & Ageing for this information.