



# Whatcom County Health Department

## **FACT SHEET: HEPATITIS B**

### **What is hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus. Symptoms may include fever, lack of energy, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, and jaundice (yellow color in the whites of the eyes or skin and darkening of urine). Some persons who have hepatitis B, particularly younger children, have no symptoms. A very small number of hepatitis B infections are fatal. Although most infected persons recover completely, some develop chronic, long-term hepatitis B (carriers). Cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver failure are serious outcomes with this disease, but may take decades to develop.

### **Where does it come from?**

- Hepatitis B is a disease of humans.
- An infected person with no symptoms or a carrier can still spread hepatitis B to others.

### **How common is hepatitis B?**

- There are 100 to 200 newly diagnosed acute hepatitis B cases in Washington each year and an estimated 20,000 persons chronically infected.

### **How is it spread?**

- The virus is spread by direct contact with the blood, serum, or sexual fluids of an infected person by sharing needles or having sex.
- Transmission can also occur between people living together for a long time in the same household or institution.
- Infected women can pass the virus to their babies.
- Blood is now tested before transfusion to prevent spreading hepatitis B but in the past some cases resulted from blood transfusion.

### **Is there a vaccine available?**

- Yes, there is a three-dose vaccine for hepatitis B. A dose is given at day 1, one to two months later, and a final dose six months after the first.

### **What is the treatment?**

- For acute HBV infection: rest and avoidance of liver toxins, including alcohol.
- For chronic HBV infection: antiviral drugs.
- End stage liver disease: A liver transplant.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

Usually within 60 to 90 days of infection, but can take as long as six months.

### **How can infected persons prevent the spread of hepatitis B?**

- Do not share any blood testing devices, needles, or drug equipment.
- Do not donate blood or organs.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, nail care devices, or any other personal items that might have your blood on them.
- If you are chronically infected, recommend that everybody in your household and any sexual partners be vaccinated against hepatitis B.

### **What should I do if I suspect someone in my family has hepatitis B?**

Contact your primary health care provider or call Whatcom County Health Department at the number listed below.

