



HEPATITIS B VIRUS (HBV)

What college students need to know

Q. What is hepatitis B?

A. Hepatitis B is a serious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. About half the people who get a hepatitis B infection develop symptoms such as fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin). While most people recover from the infection, some may develop a life-long infection that can lead to cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure, and death. Each year, about 40,000 persons in the United States get infected with HBV. People of all ages get HBV, but it is more common in young adults.

Q. How is the hepatitis B virus spread?

A. HBV is spread by direct contact with the blood or bodily fluids of an infected person. For example, you can become infected by having unprotected sex or sharing needles with an infected person. A baby can get HBV from an infected mother during childbirth. Other ways the virus is spread include receiving tattoos or body piercings using nonsterile equipment, and sharing items such as razors, piercing jewelry, and toothbrushes.

HBV is not spread through food or water or by casual contact.

Q. Who is at risk for HBV?

A. Your risk is higher if you have multiple sexual partners or are a man who has sex with men, if you live in the same household with someone who has a HBV infection, if you have a job or coursework that involves contact with blood or body fluids, if you work in a home for the developmentally disabled, if you have hemophilia, if you inject drugs, or if you travel to areas where HBV is common.

Your risk is also higher if you or your parents were born in Southeast Asia, Africa, the Amazon basin in South America, the Pacific Islands, or the Middle East.

Q. How can HBV be prevented?

A. The hepatitis B vaccine is the best protection against HBV and is recommended by leading medical and public health organizations. There is no cure for HBV infection: that is why prevention is so important.

Q. Who should get vaccinated?

A. Vaccination is recommended for everyone 18 or younger. Persons of any age whose behavior puts them at higher risk for HBV infection should also get the vaccine. Most incoming college students will have already had the vaccine series in childhood. In many states, HBV vaccine is now a requirement for entrance into school.

Q. What are the benefits of the vaccine?

A. The hepatitis B vaccine prevents HBV and its serious consequences, such as liver cancer. The vaccine can also help prevent cirrhosis of the liver, a common problem for people infected with chronic HBV. The hepatitis B vaccine is safe and effective for infants, children, and adults.

Q. What else should I know about the vaccine?

A. The best time to get the vaccine is before arriving on campus in the fall. The vaccine is available from your family health care provider and is also available at UHS for a fee. Students can call UHS at (608) 265-5600 to schedule an appointment to receive the vaccine.

Three doses are needed for complete protection. There is a minimum interval between the three shots, but it is never too late to complete the total of three, so there is no reason to start over. If you received the first or second dose at home, you can complete the series after you come to school. Students may prefer to finish the series at home during Thanksgiving or winter break, especially if it is covered by insurance. At the present time, additional booster doses are not recommended for persons with normal immune systems.

As with most vaccines, mild soreness may occur in the arm where the shot was given. Serious problems such as allergic reactions are very rare.

To comply with Wisconsin law [SS 36.25(46)], students who live in a residence hall must report whether or not they have received vaccinations against meningococcal disease and hepatitis B. You can fulfill this requirement by completing your online immunization and Health History Form at MyUHS. To sign up for your account, go to uhs.wisc.edu and click on MyUHS.