

This is a very infectious and potentially life threatening infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis B virus. Symptoms may include loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting, abdominal pain and occasionally fever. In some cases, a skin rash and joint pain may occur. The urine may become dark and the stools pale as jaundice develops. Persistent infection will develop in the majority of children infected during their first year of life and 30% -50% of children infected before the age of 6 years. Persistent infection increases the risk of chronic liver disease and cancer many years after the initial infection.

How do you catch hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B virus is transmitted by contact with infected blood or blood products or body fluids from an infected person. The virus can be spread by unprotected sexual intercourse, tattoos, body piercing, acupuncture, sharing of needles or other equipment used by injecting drug users and contact sports. Contaminated medical and dental instruments also carry a risk. The World Health Organization has estimated that over 350 million people worldwide are chronically infected with the virus.

Incubation period

Incubation period can vary between 40 to 160 days with an average of 12 weeks.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is confirmed by a blood test

Prevention

The risk of hepatitis B virus for short term travellers is low, however the risk can be associated with particular behaviours and activities. It is advisable to avoid unprotected sexual intercourse with new partners; the use of a condom will reduce but not eliminate the risk. Avoid public shaving, tattoos, acupuncture or any activity where the skin may be pierced, unless you are certain that the equipment is sterile. Consider carrying a sterile needle and syringe pack. Be sure to purchase comprehensive travel health insurance that includes evacuation and repatriation. Consider joining the Blood Care Foundation, an organisation that can provide screened blood, in an emergency to any part of the world www.bloodcare.org.uk. Be aware that precautions to protect against hepatitis B virus will also prevent other blood and body fluid-borne viruses, such as HIV and hepatitis C.

A safe and effective vaccine is available and is part of the primary immunisation schedules in many countries. Vaccination should be considered for regular travellers, those staying for prolonged periods in areas where hepatitis B is common and for those who are at higher risk due to lifestyle or occupation.

Treatment

No specific treatment is available for an acute infection and supportive care only is provided. Antiviral drugs are used in chronic hepatitis B infection.

This information is produced by MASTA as a general guide to be used in conjunction with advice from your doctor or nurse. To obtain a health brief tailored to your journey visit a MASTA associated travel clinic or www.masta-travel-health.com