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HEPATITIS A AND B VACCINATIONS: WHY YOU NEED THEM

■ WHAT ARE HEPATITIS A AND B?

Hepatitis is a virus that causes inflammation of the liver.

There are five main strains of the hepatitis virus. Only hepatitis A and B are vaccine preventable.

■ HOW DO HEPATITIS A AND B SPREAD?

Hepatitis B spreads from person to person through contact with blood and bodily fluids. About half of those infected do not know that they are infected. Infected people can become long-term (chronic) carriers, and they remain contagious for as long as the virus remains in their liver.

Hepatitis A spreads through contaminated water and unwashed hands. It can also spread through food that has been prepared with contaminated water.

■ WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Many people living with hepatitis have only mild symptoms, or none.

People infected with hepatitis A or B can develop the following symptoms: fever, tiredness, fatigue, anorexia due to a loss in appetite, nausea, stomach pain, dark urine, and yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice). Chronic carriers of the virus can develop serious liver diseases such as scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) and liver cancer.

■ HOW COMMON ARE HEPATITIS A AND B IN CANADA?

According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 325 million people worldwide live with a hepatitis infection.

Hepatitis A and B infections are less common in Canada because of vaccines. However, cases of hepatitis B may still occur in:

- unimmunized people who live in households with those infected with the virus;
- people planning extended travel to countries where the virus is common;
- health care or public safety workers;
- people with chronic liver disease;
- people on kidney dialysis;
- people with hemophilia and other conditions which require blood products on an ongoing basis;
- people who had a stem cell transplant;
- people with lifestyle risk factors such as illicit injected drug use, multiple sexual partners in the past 6 months or who have a history of sexually transmitted infection; and
- people new to Canada from countries where hepatitis B is still common.

■ DO HEPATITIS A AND B VACCINES WORK?

Hepatitis A and B vaccines are 90% to 100% effective in preventing viral hepatitis.

Vaccinating children between the ages of 5 and 15 years provides better immunity and protection against hepatitis B.

Travelers to countries where hepatitis A and B are common should also be vaccinated.

Publicly funded routine vaccination programs for hepatitis B vary between provinces and territories. To learn about the vaccination program where you reside, visit: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/provincial-territorial-immunization-information.html>

■ ARE HEPATITIS VACCINES SAFE?

Hepatitis vaccines are safe and well tolerated. Serious side effects such as a severe allergic reaction are rare. Common mild effects include pain and redness at the injection site, fever, and irritability.

Hepatitis A and B vaccines can be given alone or at the same time. Some hepatitis vaccines protect against both hepatitis A and B, and these vaccines are recommended for adults who have not previously been immunized against hepatitis A and B.

Talk with your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or local public health office about being vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.

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