HEPATITIS B AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). HBV can cause a short-term illness that leads to loss of appetite, stomach pain, tiredness, diarrhea, vomiting, jaundice (yellow skin or eyes) and pain in muscles and joints. These symptoms can last for several weeks. HBV can also cause a long-term (chronic) illness from which people never recover. Many people with chronic hepatitis B infections have no symptoms, but these people can still spread the virus. About 15% to 25% of people with chronic hepatitis B develop serious liver conditions, such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer. About 1.25 million people in the United States have chronic HBV infection. Each year 80,000 more people, mostly young adults, get infected with HBV and 4,000 to 5,000 people die from chronic HBV.

How is hepatitis B spread?
Hepatitis B is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluid infected with the hepatitis B virus enters the body of a person who is not infected. People can become infected with the virus during activities such as:

- Birth (spread from an infected mother to her baby during birth)
- Sex with an infected partner
- Sharing needles, syringes, or other drug-injection equipment
- Sharing items such as razors or toothbrushes with an infected person
- Direct contact with the blood or open sores of an infected person
- Exposure to blood from needlesticks or other sharp instruments.

Who is at risk for hepatitis B?
Although anyone can get hepatitis B, some people are at greater risk, such as those who:

- Have sex with an infected person
- Have multiple sex partners
- Have a sexually transmitted disease
- Are men who have sexual contact with other men
- Inject drugs or share needles, syringes, or other drug equipment
- Live with a person who has chronic hepatitis B
- Are exposed to blood on the job
- Are hemodialysis patients
- Travel to countries with moderate to high rates of hepatitis B

Can hepatitis B be prevented?
Yes. The best way to prevent hepatitis B is by getting the hepatitis B vaccine. Many physicians offer the vaccine to patients seen in their offices.

Who should get vaccinated against hepatitis B?
Hepatitis B vaccination is recommended for:

- All infants, starting with the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine at birth
- All children and adolescents younger than 19 years of age who have not been vaccinated
- People whose sex partners have hepatitis B
- Sexually active persons who are not in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship
- Persons seeking evaluation or treatment for a sexually transmitted disease
- Men who have sexual contact with other men
- People who share needles, syringes, or other drug-injection equipment
- People who have close household contact with someone infected with the hepatitis B virus

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• Healthcare and public safety workers at risk for exposure to blood or blood-contaminated body fluids on the job
• People with end-stage renal disease, including pre-dialysis, hemodialysis, peritoneal dialysis, and home dialysis
• Residents and staff of facilities for developmentally disabled persons
• Travelers to regions with moderate or high rates of hepatitis B
• People with chronic liver disease
• People with HIV infection
• Anyone who wishes to be protected from hepatitis B virus infection.

Is the hepatitis B vaccine safe?
Yes the hepatitis B vaccine is safe. Soreness at the injection site is the most common side effect reported. A vaccine, like any medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as allergic reactions. However, the potential risks associated with hepatitis B are much greater than the risks the vaccine poses. Since the vaccine became available in 1982, more than 100 million people have received hepatitis B vaccine in the United States and no serious side effects have been reported.

People who have ever had a life-threatening allergic reaction to baker’s yeast (the kind used to make bread) or to a previous dose of hepatitis B vaccine should not get the vaccine. People who are moderately to severely ill at the time the shot is scheduled should wait until they recover before getting the vaccine.

College students and their parents should discuss the risks and the benefits of vaccination with their healthcare providers. If college students decide to be vaccinated against hepatitis B, they (or their parents if they are less than 18 years of age) should contact their healthcare provider or the university/college student health center where they will be attending to inquire about receiving the vaccine.

For more information about the hepatitis B vaccine access the Vaccine Information Statement at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site:

Adapted from material on the CDC Web site: http://www.cdc.gov.

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