

Infant Hepatitis B

Immunisation Information

The National Immunisation Program Schedule provides free hepatitis B vaccine to infants shortly after birth.

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious disease that can be contracted throughout life. It is caused by a virus that affects the liver. Babies who get this disease may only have mild symptoms, or have no symptoms at all. However, many of these babies will go on to carry the virus in their bloodstream for many years and may be able to pass it on to other people. As many as 25 per cent of hepatitis B carriers may develop liver cancer or liver failure later in life.

How is hepatitis B spread?

The hepatitis B virus is found in infected body fluids including blood, saliva and semen. Babies whose mothers have hepatitis B are at very high risk of being infected with the disease at birth. Other ways in which hepatitis B can be spread are by blood to blood contact (this includes contact with cuts or abrasions, shared contaminated needles and syringes when injecting drugs and needlestick injuries); sexual contact; and contaminated instruments such as those used for body piercing.

Can hepatitis B be prevented?

Yes, hepatitis B can be prevented. The most important and effective way of preventing hepatitis B is immunisation. Hepatitis B vaccine can be safely given to babies shortly after birth and through infancy.

Why does my baby need to be immunised?

It is important to start the hepatitis B immunisation as soon as possible after birth to ensure that the immunisation is as effective as possible.

Why not wait until later?

While it may not seem important when your baby is small, hepatitis B is a disease that can be caught throughout life. With the new infant vaccination program your baby will be protected from hepatitis B throughout infancy and early childhood when the risk of becoming a hepatitis B carrier is high.

Why introduce infant hepatitis B immunisation?

This is part of a long-term prevention strategy to reduce the amount of hepatitis B disease in our community, to reduce the illness and death from complications due to the disease and to eventually eliminate hepatitis B from Australia. Babies will receive hepatitis B immunisation free as part of the routine childhood immunisation schedule.

Tell me more about infant hepatitis B immunisation.

Before or soon after you have your baby your doctor or midwife will discuss hepatitis B immunisation with you and will ask you to make a decision about whether you want your baby immunised. If you choose to have your baby immunised your baby will be given a dose of the hepatitis B vaccine before you leave hospital.

Your baby will need three more doses of the hepatitis B vaccine to be fully immunised. These will be given at two, four, and 12 months of age in combination with your baby's other routine childhood immunisations so your baby will not receive any additional needles.

Some preterm babies do not respond as well as term babies do to hepatitis B vaccines. These babies may require an extra dose of hepatitis B vaccine to ensure that they have adequate protection against hepatitis B disease. Parents of preterm babies should discuss the need for an extra vaccination with their doctor.

The hepatitis B vaccines used in Australia contain a genetically engineered part of the virus and a small amount of an aluminium salt.

Do I have to have my baby immunised?

No you don't, the decision is yours but it is strongly recommended by expert medical bodies such as the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). Protecting your baby from a serious preventable disease is an important decision.

Long lasting immunity

Babies who have been fully vaccinated against hepatitis B will not require adolescent hepatitis B vaccination or boosters. There is good evidence to show that people who complete a course of hepatitis B vaccination have long lasting immunity.

How will older children be protected?

The current free Year 7 school hepatitis B immunisation program will continue for all children born before 1 May 2000. This program offers a course of hepatitis B vaccine to children at the end of primary school or the beginning of secondary school in all states and territories.

Possible side effects of hepatitis B vaccine

Common side effects:

The most common side effects of the vaccine are minor and disappear quickly.

These include:

- soreness, redness and swelling at the injection site
- mild fever
- a temporary small lump at the injection site

If you are concerned at all about your baby's health after immunisation consult a doctor or immunisation nurse.

Serious side effects of hepatitis B immunisation are rare.

Pre-immunisation checklist

Immunisation should be deferred if your child is unwell. Speak to your doctor or nurse.

Before your child is immunised, tell the doctor or nurse if any of the following apply:

- Are unwell on the day of immunisation
- Have any severe allergies

Any more questions?

For more information about the hepatitis B infant immunisation program speak to your doctor, obstetrician, clinic nurse or Local Government immunisation provider.



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