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Health Department

FACTS & details

about Sedgwick County Government

Hepatitis B

April 2008

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a serious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. The virus, which is called Hepatitis B virus (HBV), can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure, and death.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis B?

Infection with HBV may result in acute (brief) or chronic (prolonged) disease, both of which may or may not have symptoms. If symptoms are present, onset of the disease is usually subtle with loss of appetite, abdominal discomfort, nausea, vomiting and joint aches. A rash may occur that progresses into jaundice (yellowing of skin and eyes). Fever may be absent or low-grade.

How soon do symptoms appear after infection occurs?

Symptoms usually appear 45 to 160 days after exposure to Hepatitis B.

How long is Hepatitis B contagious?

A person is considered contagious as long as the Hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) is detectable in the blood. Most people are infectious from 1-2 months before symptoms appear to 1-2 months after the onset of symptoms. Carriers of Hepatitis B (persons who have chronic Hepatitis B) remain infectious indefinitely.

How is Hepatitis B spread?

Transmission occurs when blood from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. HBV is also spread through having sex with an infected person without using a condom, by sharing drugs or needles when injecting drugs, through needle sticks or sharp exposures on the job, or from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

How is Hepatitis B treated?

There is no cure. Supportive treatment is available during the acute phase.

How can you prevent Hepatitis B?

The Hepatitis B vaccine is the best protection from the disease. Here are some other ways to prevent infection:

- If you are having sex, especially with more than one partner, use latex condoms correctly and every time you have sex.
- If you are pregnant, you should get a blood test for Hepatitis B.
- Infants born to HBV-infected mothers should be given HBIG (Hepatitis B immune globulin) and vaccine within 12 hours of birth.
- Do not shoot drugs. If you shoot drugs, you should stop and get into a treatment program and never share drugs, needles, or syringes.
- Do not share personal care items that might have blood on them (i.e. razors, toothbrushes).
- Consider the risks if you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing. You might get infected if the tools have someone else's blood on them or if the artist or piercer does not follow good health practices.
- If you have or had Hepatitis B, do not donate blood, organs, or tissue.
- If you are a health-care or public safety worker, get vaccinated against Hepatitis B, and always follow routine barrier precautions and safely handle needles and other sharps.

For more information:

Call 660-7392
Or visit the Sedgwick County
website at www.sedgwickcounty.org.