HEPATITIS B
GET THE FACTS

WHAT IS HEPATITIS B?
Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). HBV is far more infectious than HIV and can be prevented by a vaccine. People who have not been vaccinated may be at risk of getting infected. About 95 percent of adults will recover within 6 months of becoming infected with acute hepatitis B and are unlikely to develop chronic infection against it. The remaining 5 percent are unable to clear the virus and will become chronically infected. Chronic hepatitis B infection is treatable.

It is estimated that less than 1 percent of Canadian population is infected with acute or chronic HBV. People who are infected before the age of 7 months are very unlikely to develop chronic infection. In 2011, the overall reported rate of acute hepatitis B infection in Canada was 0.6 reported cases per 100,000 people living in Canada.

WHY IS HEPATITIS B A HEALTH CONCERN?
Many people do not know that they have the virus because symptoms can take two to six months to appear and only about 50 percent of people develop symptoms. Until then, they can spread the infection to others. You may not know you have the infection until damage has already been done to your liver. Potential complications from chronic HBV infection include cirrhosis of the liver, liver failure, liver cancer and premature death.

WHY DO I NEED MY LIVER?
Your liver is a very important organ. It helps break down food and stores vitamins and minerals. Most importantly, the liver acts as a filter for chemicals and other substances that enter the body. It is also important in the production of blood and proteins of the many of the proteins that keep your body working.

HOW IS HEPATITIS B SPREAD?
HBV is spread through contact with infected blood and body fluids. The most common risk factors for HBV infection include:

- Injection drug use (past and/or present) and intravenous drug use (injecting when sharing contaminated drug-use equipment, needles, syringes, caps, filters, straws, pipes, and cookers);
- High-risk sexual activities (e.g., unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners);
- Being born or living in a region where HBV is widespread;
- Being born to a mother with HBV;
- Exposure to blood/blood products in endemic regions without routine infection control measures;
- Use of shared or contaminated medical or drug injecting equipment. Cleaning with bleach may not kill HBV, particularly in the presence of blood or body fluids; penetrate the skin (e.g., transfusions, acupuncture, needles or sharp equipment or techniques are used; and
- Practice safer sex. Use condoms/dental dams to keep an eye on your liver health and may recommend treatment. Not all people with chronic HBV infection need to be treated. A combination of medications can be used to treat hepatitis B. Talk to your health care provider to see if treatment is right for you.

If you have acute or chronic hepatitis B, you may infect others. You can prevent spreading the virus by following the same safe sex, drug behaviour and household precautions you would if you had HIV. You should consult a health care provider to reduce your risk of infection. Additionally:

- Never donate blood, tissue, organ, or semen;
- Encourage family members living with you, sexual partners and drug use partners are tested for HBV and immunized if at risk;
- If you are pregnant, inform your health care provider so that all the necessary precautions are taken before, during and after birth; and
- Cover open sores or breaks in your skin.

REMEMBER
Hepatitis B is a vaccine-preventable disease. Chronic hepatitis B is treatable. If you think you may have hepatitis B, it is important to find out if you have the virus so that you can take the necessary steps to protect yourself and others.

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WHAT IF I HAVE HEPATITIS B?
Most adults with hepatitis B infection will clear the virus on their own within 6 months. If you clear the virus, you will no longer be infected and will not be able to transmit the virus to others. You will also have antibodies that protect you from getting hepatitis B again.

- If you have chronic HBV infection, your healthcare provider will monitor you closely with blood tests to keep an eye on your liver health and may recommend treatment. Not all people with chronic HBV infection need to be treated. A combination of medications can be used to treat hepatitis B. Talk to your health care provider to see if treatment is right for you.
- If you have an acute or chronic infection, you should advise anyone who may have had contact with your blood or bodily fluids (e.g., sexual partners, you live with, and health care workers).

These people should consult a health care provider right away so that they can prevent getting the infection.

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WHAT CAN I EXPECT TO FIND OUT IF I HAVE ACUTE OR CHRONIC Hepatitis B?
If you think you are at risk, or may be infected with hepatitis B, you should consult a health care provider about testing for hepatitis B, and the hepatitis B vaccine.

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