

# HEPATITIS B AND COLLEGE STUDENTS

## **Hepatitis B is a serious disease.**

Hepatitis B is a virus that affects the liver. It is one of several hepatitis diseases (for example, hepatitis A and hepatitis C) that are caused by different viruses but are similar in that they all attack the liver. The hepatitis B virus (HBV) can cause a short-term (acute) 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. It can also cause a long-term (chronic) illness from which people never recover. A person might not look or feel sick, but he or she carries the hepatitis B virus in their blood for the rest of their lives and can infect other people with the hepatitis B virus. About 1.25 million people in the United States have chronic HBV infection. Each year 60,000 more people, **mostly young adults**, get infected with HBV and 4,000 to 5,000 people die from chronic hepatitis B.

## **How do you catch hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis B virus is spread through contact with blood or other body fluids of an infected person. You can catch the virus by having unprotected sex, by sharing drug needles or by sharing personal items like razors and toothbrushes with someone who is infected. Babies of chronic HBV mothers can become infected during birth. Children can be infected through exposure to blood and other body fluids from infected children or adults.

## **Who is at risk?**

Anyone who participates in any of the behaviors listed above is at risk of acquiring hepatitis B.

## **What can be done?**

There are hepatitis B vaccines available that can prevent infection with the hepatitis B virus. Many physicians offer the vaccine to patients seen in their offices. These are the first anti-cancer vaccines, because they can prevent a form of liver cancer that can develop in a person who gets a chronic hepatitis B infection.

## **What about the vaccine?**

A vaccine, like any other medicine, is capable of causing serious problems, such as allergic reactions. Most people who get hepatitis B vaccine do not have any problems with it. People who have ever had a life-threatening allergic reaction to baker's yeast (kind used to make bread) or to a previous dose of the hepatitis B vaccine should not get the vaccine. People who are moderately to severely ill at the time the shot is scheduled should usually wait until they recover before getting the vaccine. Hepatitis B vaccine is very safe and the risk of it causing serious harm is extremely small. Hepatitis is a serious disease and getting the vaccine is safer than getting the disease. College their health care providers. For more information about the hepatitis vaccine, access the Vaccine Information Sheet at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site <http://www.cdc.gov/nip/publications/VIS>. 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 health care provider or the university/college student health center where they will be attending to inquire about receiving the vaccine.

Adapted from CDC publications.