



ParentPages

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Hepatitis B Protection from Birth to Adulthood

Why are immunizations to protect against hepatitis B so important? Hepatitis B infection is caused by a virus that attacks the liver. This virus is spread person to person and is found in the blood and body fluids of those infected. Hepatitis B affects people of all ages—from babies to older adults—all over the world.

Some people get infected with hepatitis B and recover within six months. Others develop a chronic infection that can last a lifetime and destroy their liver. Of those who develop chronic hepatitis B—also known as “chronic carriers”—25 percent will develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer. Some will die at an early age. Most people who die of liver disease from hepatitis B are adults; however, some are children and even infants.

There is good news. A three-dose series of hepatitis B vaccine is available to protect against the disease. Hepatitis B is still spreading in Georgia. By learning about this serious disease and getting the vaccine to prevent it, you can protect yourself and your loved ones.

Newborn babies

When a mother is infected with hepatitis B, her baby is exposed to the virus through blood at the time of birth. If the baby does not receive the first dose of hepatitis B vaccine after birth (preferably within 12 hours), the baby has a 70 to 90 percent risk of getting infected and becoming a chronic carrier. Because this baby is at risk of hepatitis B infection, the rest of the vaccine series needs to be taken by age 6 to 7 months. Babies born to hepatitis B-infected mothers should also get the immune globulin (called HBIG) that protects against hepatitis B right after birth.

Sometimes the hospital does not know a pregnant woman has hepatitis B, when she is admitted for delivery. Sometimes the woman does not even know. This is one reason why it is important for all babies to receive hepatitis B vaccine in the hospital soon after birth.

Young children

If they have not completed the hepatitis B vaccine series, children can get infected when they are exposed to the blood of someone who has hepatitis B. This could happen at home when personal items are shared (toothbrushes, nail clippers, etc.) or handled (bloody bandages, instruments for testing blood sugar, etc.). Exposure could also happen

at daycare or school if a bleeding accident occurs. If your child is exposed to someone who has hepatitis B at home or school, he/she is protected if he/she has received the hepatitis B vaccine series.

Teenagers

Hepatitis B spreads through infected blood or sexual contact. Again, the hepatitis B vaccine series will protect teens from the virus. Since 1997, hepatitis B shots have been required for school attendance in Georgia for students born after January 1, 1992. Many colleges also require the vaccine series for freshman under age 19. If you are not sure if your teenager received hepatitis B vaccinations, check with the doctor's office.

Adults at risk

In Georgia, most reported cases of hepatitis B occur in adults 19 to 40 years of age who were not vaccinated against the disease. Some adults are at higher risk than others due to exposure at work, certain health conditions or lifestyles. If you are concerned about the risk of hepatitis B infection, talk to your doctor about getting the vaccine series. There is even a combination vaccine for adults that protects against both hepatitis A and hepatitis B in a three-shot series (rather than five shots, if given separately). This may be handy for people who travel outside the country or have lifestyles that put them at risk of getting infected.

Some older adults also may be at risk of hepatitis B exposure and should receive the three-dose series of vaccine. If you have been diagnosed with another type of hepatitis (like hepatitis C), but are negative for hepatitis B, it's a good idea to be vaccinated against hepatitis B. Anyone who may need to begin kidney dialysis should also get vaccinated.

Please remember hepatitis B immunization is important at all ages.

This article was written by Lynne Mercedes, Hepatitis Program Director, Georgia Division of Public Health. ■

Take Charge of Your Health with Adult Shots

Vaccines are available and recommended to protect adults in the United States from chickenpox, diphtheria, hepatitis A, hepatitis B, human papillomavirus/cervical cancer (HPV), influenza, measles, meningococcal disease, mumps, pertussis (whooping cough), pneumococcal disease, rubella, shingles and tetanus.

"Combined, these infectious diseases kill more Americans annually than breast cancer, HIV/AIDS or traffic accidents," said William Schaffner, MD, Vice President of the National Foundation on Infectious Diseases (NFID)¹.

A national survey showed that most adults can only name one or two vaccine-preventable diseases that they may be at risk of getting. In addition, the CDC's National Immunization Survey reports the following data¹:

- 2.1 percent of adults 18 to 64 years of age are immunized against tetanus-diphtheria-whooping cough. Infants too young to have begun or completed the vaccine series can die from whooping cough. Studies show that whooping cough in these little ones can come from a family member.
- Less than two percent of adults are vaccinated with the herpes zoster/shingles vaccine. Every year, there are more than 1 million new cases of shingles – anyone who has had chickenpox is at risk of getting shingles².

One of the most important reasons for adults to receive their vaccines (shots) is to protect our children and the elderly. Many people may not realize that a disease they get can be deadly for a child or elder who is not protected. These unprotected are either too young to have received all of their shots or could have another health condition that prevents them from getting all the shots they need. In addition, adults who get their shots will prevent lost days at work and lost income.



As adults, sometimes our medical history can be complicated and involve a lot of detailed information. A good way to manage your own healthcare is to start a personal health record (PHR). A PHR can help you receive fast care and avoid repeating tests or care you may have already received. A PHR should include a one-page sheet or wallet size card stating any current medical needs, medications, immunizations you have received (shots, etc.) and emergency contact information. Keep this part of your PHR in your car or purse/briefcase in case of emergency. A second part of your PHR should include a history of medical care you have received in the past and a list of preventive tests you will need in the future. Keep this document in a place at home where you can easily find it, take it to healthcare visits and consult it at least once every few months. Taking control of your health is also a good example for the children in your family. Take the time to explain to them what and why it is important to have a PHR. To learn more about how to create a PHR, go to <http://www.myphr.com/>.

Take Action Now:

- Ask your healthcare provider which vaccines are needed and/or go to <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/recs/schedules/adult-schedule.htm> or www.immunize.org/catg.d/p4036.pdf.
- Get the vaccines you need to protect your family.
- Ask your healthcare providers if they have received all of their vaccines.
- Ask those who are caring for your children and parents if they have received their vaccines.
- Start a Personal Health Record (PHR) for yourself and ensure all family members have one as well.

1. National Foundation for Infectious Diseases Press Conference January 23, 2008. "New Data Show Unacceptably Low Adult Immunization Rates and that Adults Unaware of Infectious Disease Threat. Experts Urge Integration of Adult Vaccine into Routine Care to Save Lives, Reduce Needless Illness."
2. "Increasing Adult Vaccination Rates – What Works." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www2.cdc.gov/vaccines/ed/whatworks/index.html>. Accessed March 7, 2008. ■