HEPATITIS B

What is it?

Hepatitis B is an inflammation of the liver caused by a virus. It is quite different from Hepatitis A.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptom is jaundice - yellowish skin or eyes and dark urine with pale stools. People can also feel a bit tired and achey, with some abdominal discomfort and sometimes nausea and vomiting. Some people may have no symptoms at all, but are still infectious to others.

Is it infectious?

Yes. It is transmitted in 3 ways - by sexual contact, blood contact (eg sharing equipment for injecting drugs) and from an infected mother to her child. Hepatitis B is not common in Britain but is more common in other parts of the world. It is not passed on through everyday activities such as sharing food, crockery bathrooms or toilets.

What is the incubation period?

It can be anything between 2 weeks and six months.

Can it be prevented?

Yes. Safer sex (condoms) will prevent the spread of Hepatitis B. People should have cuts covered when they are clearing up any spillages of blood or other body fluids. Blood donors are screened. Clean needles should be used for all injections. A vaccine is also available. This should be given to the sexual partners and families of people carrying the Hepatitis B virus, and people in the health care profession who have blood contact with patients.

Is there any treatment?

Most people with Hepatitis B will get better on their own without any treatment apart from rest. Some people will get better from their jaundice and symptoms but will still have the virus in their blood. These people should attend their doctor regularly to have their liver checked and discuss treatment.

How soon can you return to work or school?

Hepatitis B is not infectious in normal school or work conditions. People can return to work as soon as they feel well.