Hepatitis B

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. This can be caused by alcohol and some drugs, but usually it is the result of a viral infection. There are many types of virus which can cause hepatitis. Each of these viruses acts differently.

The hepatitis B virus (HBV) is very common worldwide. It is very infectious.

The virus can be spread in the following ways:
- by unprotected (without a condom) penetrative sex (when the penis enters the anus, vagina or mouth) with someone who is infected. Also by sex which draws blood with someone who is infected
- by sharing contaminated needles or other drug-injecting equipment
- by using non-sterilised equipment for tattooing, acupuncture or body piercing
- from an infected mother to her baby, mainly during delivery. Immunisation of the baby at birth prevents the transmission of hepatitis B
- through a blood transfusion in a country where blood is not tested for the hepatitis B virus. All blood for transfusion in the UK is tested.

Signs and symptoms
People may have no symptoms at all, but they can still pass on the virus to others. Symptoms may include:
- a short, mild, flu-like illness
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea
- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- jaundice (yellow skin and whites of eyes, darker yellow urine and pale faeces)
- itchy skin

Some people may need to be admitted to hospital.
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with the virus, such as not sharing toothbrushes or shaving equipment.

Remember, using condoms can reduce your risk of getting or passing on sexually transmitted infections.

Further information
For further information, visit the British Liver Trust website at www.britishlivertrust.org.uk, or write to British Liver Trust, Ransomes Europark, Ipswich, IP3 9QG. Information on hepatitis B is also available from NHS Direct on 0845 46 47.

This factsheet is one of a series which give information on the following range of infections and diseases: bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, cystitis, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis (A, B and C), non-specific urethritis, penile cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), prostate cancer, pubic lice, scabies, syphilis, testicular cancer, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.

Free copies of any of these factsheets are available from GP surgeries, NHS sexual health (GUM) clinics, or your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local Health Authority).