



# West Meets East

INTEGRATING EASTERN PHILOSOPHIES WITH  
WESTERN APPROACHES TO

# Managing CHB



## Hepatitis B and You: Getting the Facts

### What is hepatitis B? Can it cause cancer and liver failure?

Hepatitis B is a viral infection that attacks your liver. *Acute* hepatitis B infection usually produces symptoms such as fever, decreased appetite, nausea and vomiting, weakness and fatigue, and occasionally dark urine with yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes. Symptoms of *acute* hepatitis B typically appear weeks to months after you become infected with the virus and can last for weeks to months, although some persons may not experience any symptoms (especially infants and children). In most adult persons, the hepatitis B virus is eradicated by the body, the *acute* infection disappears completely, and immunity develops to the virus. But in a small number of persons the virus is not eradicated, leading to *chronic* hepatitis B infection. However, if children younger than 5 are infected with hepatitis B, the vast majority (>90%) will develop *chronic* infection, because the immunity is weaker in young children and they cannot eradicate the virus on their own. *Chronic* hepatitis B can last for years or decades without causing any symptoms while it slowly and often silently produces progressive liver damage that includes liver scarring (fibrosis, cirrhosis), liver cancer, and/or liver failure. For persons with *chronic* hepatitis B, the risk of developing these complications is higher in men than in women and with increasing age. The risk is also increased by drinking alcohol and when HIV, hepatitis D, or hepatitis C infection is present at the same time.

### How do I get hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B virus is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluids from someone who has the infection directly enters the body of an uninfected person. For example, hepatitis B can be spread by sex, by sharing needles during injection drug use, or by an accidental needle stick. It can be spread by sharing razors, toothbrushes, or anything else that might have hepatitis B-infected blood on it including clippers and other manicure tools in nail salons. Hepatitis B also can be passed from an infected mother to her baby at birth, which is the most common cause of spread worldwide. Hepatitis B is not inherited and is not spread through sharing eating utensils, improperly prepared food, contaminated food or water, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing or sneezing.

### How can I avoid getting hepatitis B?

Anyone can get hepatitis B, but the risk is greater in persons who:

- Have sex with an infected person or with a person with any sexually transmitted disease
- Inject drugs or share needles, syringes, or other drug equipment
- Live with a person who has *chronic* hepatitis B
- Were born to hepatitis B-infected mothers
- Are directly exposed to blood or open wounds or sores of an infected person
- Are hemodialysis patients
- Travel to countries with moderate to high rates of hepatitis B

The best way for you to reduce the risk of acquiring hepatitis B is by getting vaccinated against it. In addition to vaccination, simple ways to reduce the risk of acquiring hepatitis B include using condoms with sexual partners, avoiding illegal street drugs, hand washing after exposure to blood, covering all cuts carefully, cleaning blood spills with a dilute bleach solution, discarding sanitary napkins and tampons into plastic bags, and ensuring that new, sterile needles are used for ear or body piercing, tattooing, or acupuncture.

### Who should be tested for hepatitis B?

Testing is the only way to know if you have hepatitis B. Asian Americans make up 5% of the U.S. population but account for more than 50% of Americans living with hepatitis B. Hepatitis B testing is recommended for anyone born in a region of the world where hepatitis B is common, including but not limited to Asia, the Pacific Islands (excluding Australia and New Zealand), parts of Eastern and Southern Europe, and most of Sub-Saharan Africa. Hepatitis B testing is also recommended for:

- Persons who were born in the U.S with at least one parent who was born in a region of the world where hepatitis B is common
- All pregnant women
- People who inject drugs
- Household and sexual contacts of people with hepatitis B
- People with certain medical conditions including HIV infection and those receiving chemotherapy or on hemodialysis
- Men who have sex with men

### How can I get checked for hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B can be detected by a simple blood test, but doctors do not always suggest a hepatitis B blood test, so it is important to ask to be tested. Hepatitis B testing is available from many sources and agencies throughout the U.S. Testing for hepatitis B should be available at doctors' offices, community health clinics, local health departments, and local Planned Parenthood health centers.

The basic blood test for hepatitis B consists of three screening tests—the hepatitis B blood panel—all three of which are performed on only a single blood sample.

1. Hepatitis B surface antigen screening test (also called HBsAg), which determines whether a person currently has the infection.
2. Hepatitis B core antibody screening test (also called anti-HBc, or HBcAb), which determines whether a person has ever been infected.
3. Hepatitis B surface antibody screening test (also called anti-HBs, or HBsAb), which determines whether a person has cleared the virus after infection and has developed immunity, or has been vaccinated and is now immune to future infections. The hepatitis B surface antibody test detects the presence of antibodies the immune system produces to attack the virus. These antibodies appear in persons who have been vaccinated against hepatitis B or who had been infected and cleared the virus from their bodies. A positive hepatitis B surface antibody test means the person has immunity from hepatitis B.

### Why should hepatitis B get treated?

Rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and close medical monitoring are usually recommended for persons with *acute* hepatitis B infection to support viral eradication. Persons living with *chronic* hepatitis B should be evaluated for liver complications and monitored on a regular basis with blood tests, liver ultrasound, and even liver biopsy if needed. However, not all persons with *chronic* hepatitis B require immediate treatment. If there is evidence of progression or of significant liver inflammation or scarring, treatment is available to prevent, slow or reverse the effects of liver disease. Left untreated, nearly 1 in 4 people living with hepatitis B develop serious liver problems, including liver cancer, a leading cause of cancer deaths among Asian Americans. Getting tested can help you access potentially lifesaving treatments that can reduce the risk of serious liver damage if you

are discovered to have *chronic* hepatitis B infection. **It is important to remember that serious liver disease and severe progression can occur in persons who have completely no symptoms of illness. Therefore, routine evaluation and monitoring are recommended for all persons with chronic hepatitis B regardless of the presence of symptoms.**

### **Is there a pill to stop hepatitis B from damaging my liver?**

Specific treatment for *acute* hepatitis B usually is not necessary since the infection clears completely in about 95% of adults within 6 months. A number of oral antiviral medications are available in pill form to treat persons who develop *chronic* hepatitis B. These antiviral pills can help reduce or even reverse liver damage and help prevent long-term liver complications, although they will not eradicate the hepatitis B virus or cure the infection.

### **Can Traditional Chinese Medicine, such as herbs and acupuncture, stop hepatitis B?**

Hepatitis has been treated with traditional medicines for many centuries. Currently, Chinese herbal medicine is used in combination with or as an alternative to Western antiviral drugs to treat *chronic* hepatitis B, although it is uncertain whether acupuncture has a beneficial effect. Traditional Chinese Medicine may offer potential benefits such as anti-inflammatory, anticancer, antiviral, immune-enhancing, and anti-fibrotic effects for persons with *chronic* hepatitis B. However, large, carefully designed clinical studies and long-term follow-up are needed to provide conclusive evidence of effectiveness and safety of Traditional Chinese Medicine in *chronic* hepatitis B. Meanwhile, it is important to ask your doctor before taking any Eastern liver remedies because they might interfere with prescribed Western medicines or even cause liver damage.

### **Bottom line:**

- If you are born in East Asia or other areas where hepatitis B is common, please ask your doctor to test you for hepatitis B.
- If you have hepatitis B, please ask your doctor if you should be treated for it.
- In addition, whether you need a pill for *chronic* hepatitis B or not, you should get blood tests and liver ultrasound every 6 months to monitor hepatitis B and to check for liver cancer.
- Tell your doctor about all medications you are taking including Traditional Chinese Herbal Medications. Some herbal medications may be harmful to your liver.