

HEPATITIS B – EPATITE B

Hepatitis B is a contagious disease that attacks the liver. It is caused by a micro-organism known as the hepatitis B virus, which is transmitted through the blood and through sexual relations. This virus is, in fact, present in the blood and in other body fluids, especially in sperm and vaginal secretions of infected individuals or chronic carriers of the disease. The latter are those who, even in absence of the disease, host the infective agent and can transmit it to others. These “hosts” are more dangerous than those who are infected, since they often are unaware of their conditions and, therefore, are not capable of taking measures to prevent contagion.

The number of carriers in countries such as Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Central and South America is extremely high, exceeding 10% of the total population in certain areas.

In many of these areas, most cases of infection is detected in children, in which the disease tends to become chronic with respect to adults. A particularly serious situation is represented by the transmission of the virus from mother the child during pregnancy and especially at the time of birth.

HOW DOES HEPATITIS B MANIFEST ITSELF?

After a period of time that varies from 2-6 months, from the time of contagion, the typical symptoms of the disease appear: weakness, loss of appetite, jaundice (*n.b.* yellowing of the mucous membranes), dark coloring of the urine, light coloring of the feces, and fever.

This is the typical description of hepatitis B (not different from any other acute hepatitis). Yet, this type of hepatitis can present itself in many forms, which vary from the slightest cases, without evident symptoms, to cases in which the liver is severely attacked.

In most cases, hepatitis B can be cured, but it can oftentimes also become chronic, altering into: chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis (*n.b.* progressive inflammatory disease of the liver), or liver cancer. The disease becomes chronic in an average of 5-10% of cases, with noticeable differences in relation to age (90% in newborns, 20-50% in children up to 5 years of age, 1-10% in those older than 5).

HOW TO PREVENT CONTRACTING HEPATITIS B

The prevention used for hepatitis B is based on the strict use of correct behavior, as well as the use of vaccines.

However, promiscuous sexual behavior (ex. having more than one partner at a time), occasional sex without the use of condoms, and sharing needles must absolutely be avoided.

If you know you are a carrier:

- Immediately inform your partner, and those with whom you live, on the existence of a safe and effective vaccine that can be administered at no charge;
- Use only your own toothbrush, nail scissors, razors, and any other manicure cutting tool;
- If using needles for medication or drugs, always dispose of the needles properly so that others do not come into contact with them;
- If pregnant, inform your gynecologist so that preventive measures, which are already known to be efficient, can be taken to protect the child you are carrying.

If further information is required regarding Hepatitis B, or a vaccine is required, contact the nearest Public Health Service.

If you are interested in a check-up to determine if you have been infected, contact your primary doctor.

Updated: June 2003/Aggiornato a giugno 2003

Translated by Cooperativa INTEGRA/Tradotto dalla Cooperativa INTEGRA

With the contribution of the Province of Modena/Con il contributo della Provincia di Modena

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