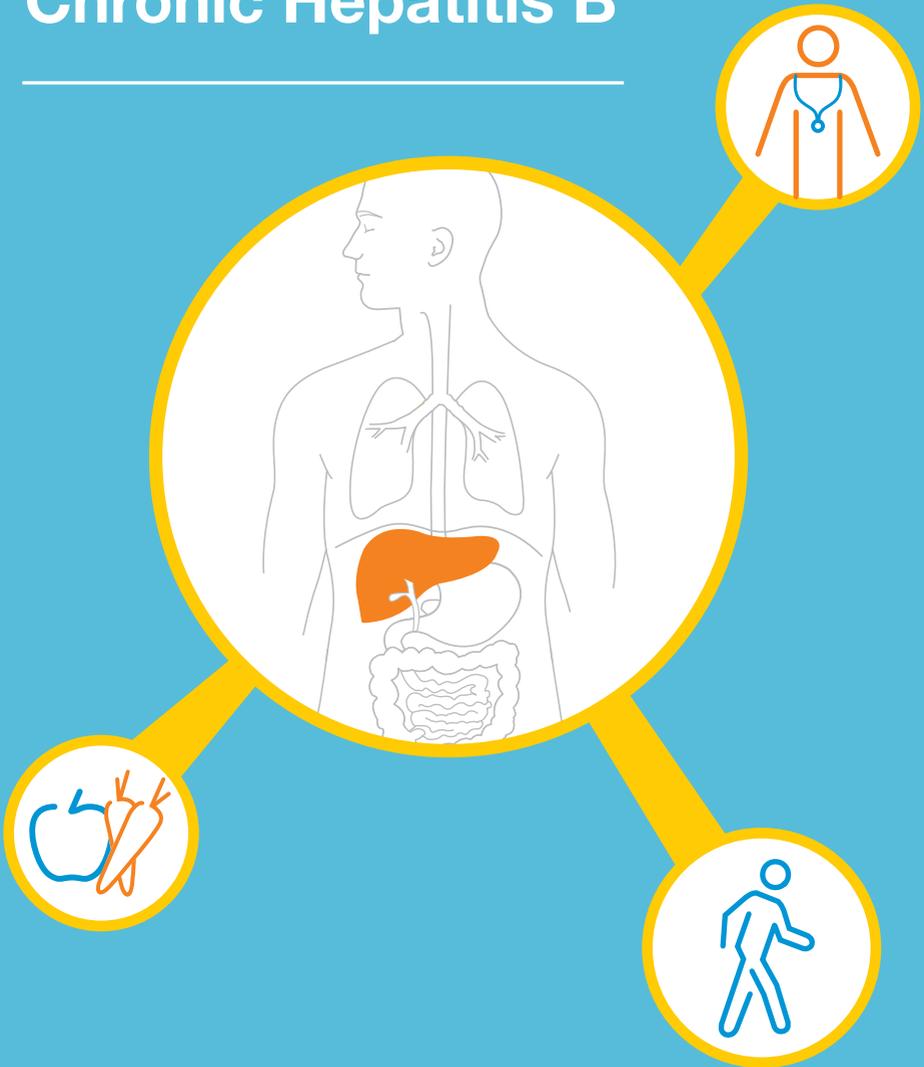


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# *Living Well with* **Chronic Hepatitis B**

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## ***Living well with chronic hepatitis B***

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### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Note to reader**

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This booklet is intended as a general introduction to the topic and should not be seen as a substitute for medical advice. You should obtain independent advice relevant to your specific situation from appropriate professionals, and you may wish to discuss issues raised in this booklet with them.



### **Cancer Council NSW**

Cancer Council is the leading cancer charity in NSW. It plays a unique and important role in the fight against cancer through undertaking high-quality research, advocating on cancer issues, providing information and services to the public and people with cancer and raising funds for cancer programs.

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# *What is* **chronic hepatitis B?**

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Hepatitis B is an infection caused by a virus carried in your blood, which affects your liver. The infection can be acute (short-lived) or chronic (long-lasting). If you have chronic hepatitis B (or CHB), you are likely to have been infected since you were a baby.

If you have CHB, you must see your doctor regularly. While you may have no symptoms for many years, this is not a guarantee that your liver is unaffected by the virus.

People with CHB need lifelong monitoring, so that changes in their disease course get picked up in time. This ensures that if their disease becomes active, they can start treatment before liver damage occurs.

**IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT LIVER DAMAGE CAN OCCUR EVEN IF YOU FEEL HEALTHY. FOR THIS REASON, PEOPLE WITH CHRONIC HEPATITIS B NEED REGULAR HEALTH CHECKS.**

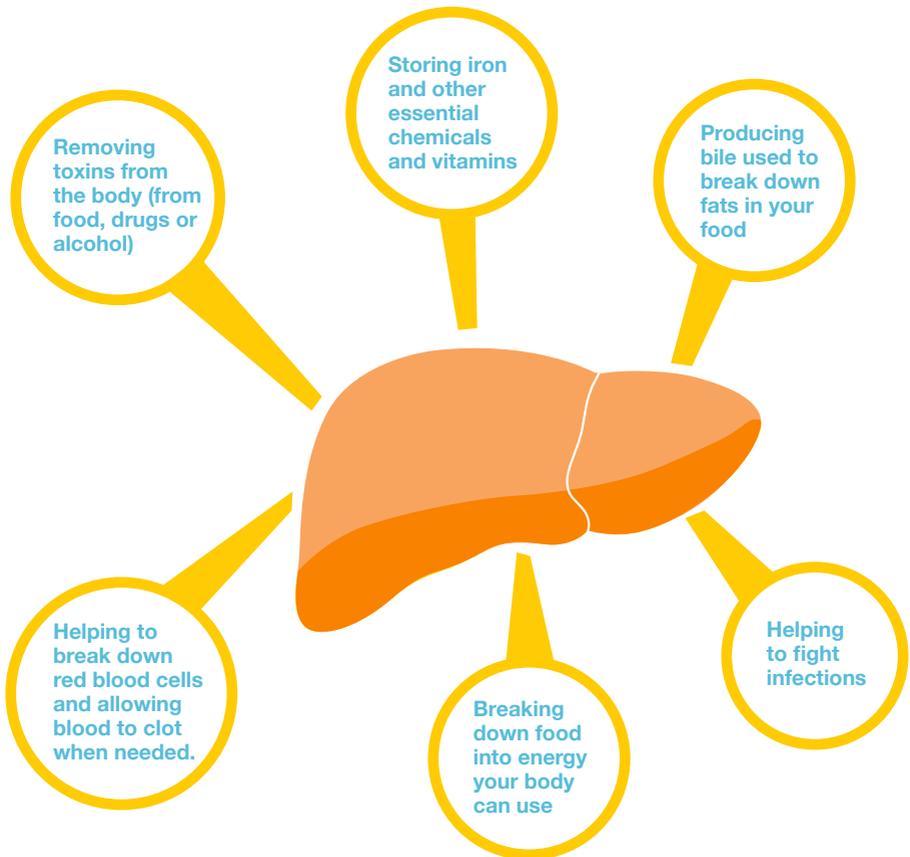
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# Hepatitis B

## and your liver

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The liver is the largest organ in your body. It has many important bodily functions, which keep you healthy. Some of its functions are listed below:



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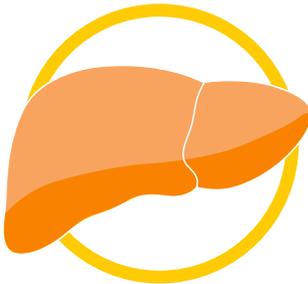
# What is liver cirrhosis?

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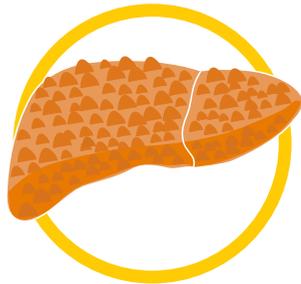
If the hepatitis B virus causes damage to your liver, scarring can develop. This scarring is called **fibrosis**. As fibrosis progresses it changes the shape of the liver and affects how well it works. If scarring is very extensive, we call this **cirrhosis**.

Cirrhosis signifies severe liver damage and prevents the liver in performing its necessary tasks. Left untreated, the damage from your liver can lead to liver failure or liver cancer.

Remember, many people do not have symptoms of liver damage until their disease is well advanced. It is very important to follow your doctor's advice and have all regular tests ordered for you.



**NORMAL LIVER**



**CIRRHOSIS LIVER**

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# Does CHB cause liver cancer

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Chronic hepatitis B infection increases your risk of developing cancer of the liver, also known as **hepatocellular carcinoma** or **HCC**.

While the number of new diagnoses of liver cancer is on the rise in Australia, many are preventable. Unfortunately at present many liver cancers are diagnosed too late, when treatment results are poor.

Some people with liver cancer may have no symptoms. Others may experience:



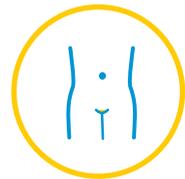
**TIREDFNESS**



**WEIGHTLOSS**



**LOSS OF  
APPETITE**



**ABDOMINAL  
PAIN**

As these symptoms are common to many conditions, patients may think they are not serious and may not need medical attention. Other people experience yellowing of their eyes and skin (jaundice) and pass dark urine.

To rule out liver cancer, people with CHB need to have regular **blood tests** and **liver ultrasound examinations**. Your GP will advise you when you need to start having 6 monthly ultrasound scans to check for liver changes. Early detection means that there are more treatment options and there is more chance they are successful.

If your GP is concerned about your test results, they will refer you to a specialist liver clinic.

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# Who needs medical treatment for CHB?

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Not everybody who has chronic hepatitis B needs medical treatment and the results of your tests help your GP decide if treatment is for you. The goal of treatment is to protect your liver from damage and control the virus from multiplying.

You require treatment if virus levels are high and causing damage to your liver. If virus levels are high, but not causing liver damage, your doctor might just continue to monitor your blood tests results regularly.

1

## SILENT PHASE

- First stage of the infection
- High level of hepatitis B virus
- The liver is working well
- Little risk of liver damage
- No medication required
- Regular blood tests help monitor if the CHB moves to phase 2

2

## DAMAGE PHASE

- The immune system has decided to fight the hepatitis B virus
- This causes inflammation, which leads to liver damage
- Only blood test will be able to determine if this is occurring
- Medication may be needed

Your blood test results help your doctor identify which phase your disease is in. Some phases are associated with liver damage, while in others the chance of liver damage occurring is small. SEE DIAGRAM

As CHB infection can move between disease phases at any time, your blood tests need to be repeated regularly.

**3**

### CONTROL PHASE

- The virus is under control
- If you are taking medication it's very important that you do not stop taking it
- Regular blood tests are indicated, to continue to monitor the health of your liver

**4**

### VIRAL RELAPSE

- The virus level has risen and your immune system is fighting back
- Your liver blood tests will show inflammation and damage may be occurring
- Medication may be needed

**TREATMENT MAY BE REQUIRED FOR PATIENTS IN PHASE 2 AND 4 OF CHRONIC HEPATITIS B INFECTION, TO CONTROL THE VIRUS FROM MULTIPLYING AND TO REDUCE LIVER CANCER RISK.**

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# Medications for CHB

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The most common type of treatment for chronic hepatitis B is an antiviral tablet taken once a day. Most people need treatment for life. The antiviral medications most commonly prescribed are **Entecavir** and **Tenofovir**. Your doctor will discuss with you which is the best tablet for you. Side effects are uncommon, but you will need to have more frequent blood tests to check for any changes or side effects.

Remembering to take the medication every day is very important. Missing doses gives the hepatitis B virus an opportunity to start multiplying again and this puts you at risk of liver damage. If you forget to take the treatment as indicated, this could cause drug resistance, when the medications no longer work to control the virus from replicating.

Once your hepatitis B viral levels come down with treatment, the aim is to keep them low.

Make sure you always have enough medication handy. Fill your prescription a few days before your tablet supply is due to run out. Tell your GP if you're planning a holiday, to make sure you have enough treatment while you are away. If you run out of tablets while away from home, it may be very difficult to find a doctor to prescribe them and they might be much more expensive to purchase.

If you are a female considering pregnancy, speak with your GP. Hepatitis B virus levels may rise during pregnancy, putting the baby at greater risk of becoming infected at birth. You may need to see a liver specialist and antiviral treatment may be indicated.

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# Tips for staying healthy with CHB

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While hepatitis B cannot be cured, there are things you can do to stay healthy and to reduce the risk of damage to your liver.



### **Maintaining a healthy diet is an excellent start.**

Avoid eating foods high in sugar or in fat, to lower your risk of getting diabetes and high cholesterol. Speak with your doctor about your current diet and seek advice on changes which can help you stay healthy.



### **Regular exercise is advisable.**

A healthy diet and exercise not only protect your liver, but can improve your general health, helping to reduce the risk of many other illnesses. Aim to do 30–60 minutes of moderate physical activity every day. This may include brisk walking, mowing the lawn, housework or some sporting activities.



### **Avoid alcohol.**

When you drink alcohol, your liver has to work harder to process toxins. This puts more stress on the liver and over time this can cause liver damage. Australian guidelines recommend that men and women should not exceed two standard alcoholic drinks per day. If you have fibrosis or cirrhosis, avoid alcohol altogether.



### **Ask your GP if hepatitis A vaccination is right for you.**

Discussing your risk factors for other blood-borne viruses will help you understand how you can avoid contracting them.

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# Protecting your family and friends against hepatitis B

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The good news is that there is a very effective **vaccine** against hepatitis B. The vaccine works only for people who have not had hepatitis B infection already. You should encourage people you are in close contact with (e.g. members of your household, close family and/ or your husband/ wife/ sexual partner) to be tested and vaccinated. Below are some other tips about how to reduce the risk of spreading hepatitis B:



If you cut yourself, clean the affected area and cover it with a water resistant band-aid until the cut has healed. The hepatitis B virus can survive outside the body for many days.



You cannot catch hepatitis B from sharing food, cups, plates or cutlery.



To prevent cross-infection, do not share nail clippers, razors, toothbrushes or injecting materials.



As hepatitis B can also be spread by sexual contact, it is advisable to use condoms with your husband/ wife/ sexual partner. This can offer protection if they have not had the hepatitis B vaccine.

**THE BEST WAY TO PROTECT YOUR FAMILY AND PARTNER AGAINST HEPATITIS B IS TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO SEE THEIR GP FOR A BLOOD TEST AND VACCINATION IF NEEDED.**

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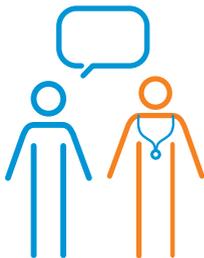
# *Do I need to tell others* **I have hepatitis B?**

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You do not need to tell everyone that you have hepatitis B. You need to tell your household members and your sexual partners, so they can be tested and vaccinated. If you need help talking to them about it, speak to your doctor first.

Situations when you have to tell other people you have chronic hepatitis B include the following:

- You are applying to join the Australian Defence Force
- You are a health-care worker performing invasive procedures (like a surgeon or a dentist)
- If your insurance company requests information about your past infections and illnesses
- If you are considering donating blood products or semen.



**Telling health-care workers (your dentist or doctor) you have chronic hepatitis B can help them give you better care, but this is entirely your choice. If you decide to tell them, they have a responsibility to protect your privacy and keep your information confidential.**

**They cannot discriminate against you.**

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# *What to expect at your* **CHB medical checkup visit**

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If you have CHB you will need to visit your GP every 6-12 months, depending on your doctor's advice. Your GP will request blood tests to check how the liver is functioning and to measure the amount of hepatitis B virus in your blood.

These blood tests include:

- **Hepatitis B DNA level** – this measures the number of viral particles in your blood
- This is usually measured once every 12 months
- If you are on treatment, you will have the test more often, depending on previous results
- **Liver tests**, including **ALT (alanine aminotransferase)**. They measure liver inflammation and possible injury to liver cells
- If your doctor recommends regular **ultrasound examinations** to check for liver cancer (HCC), he or she may also check the level of AFP in your blood. **AFP (alpha feto- protein)** is a protein can become elevated in liver cancer. However high AFP blood levels may also occur for other reasons, such as pregnancy
- The results of your investigations help your GP monitor your condition and to check if it may be causing damage to your liver
- If your tests are abnormal, your GP will refer you to a **liver specialist**, who will advise if you need to start medical treatment
- If your CHB is under good control, the specialist may recommend you return to the care of your GP for medical follow ups

1

Regular check-ups by your doctor, with support from a clinical nurse specialist and liver specialist



Regular blood tests to monitor your liver



Tests to check for liver damage and liver cancer

2

## What to expect when you are referred to a liver specialist

Your doctor may refer you to a liver specialist if your test results require further evaluation



Review by liver specialist

3

Return to the care of your family doctor when your disease is under control

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**DO NOT SKIP MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS: REGULAR CHECKS ARE THE ONLY WAY YOUR DOCTOR CAN TELL IF THE HEPATITIS B VIRUS IS HARMING YOUR LIVER.**

The appointment card on the next page can help you keep track of all your medical appointments.

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