Hepatitis B vaccinations

- Vaccines to protect against hepatitis B are very safe and highly effective.
- Infants should be vaccinated against hepatitis B at birth.
- Adults at greater risk should be vaccinated against hepatitis B.

Hepatitis B can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine that has been available since 1982. In Australia, the hepatitis B vaccination program commenced in 1988, targeting groups at high risk of infection.

Who should be vaccinated?

It is now recommended that all babies and adolescents be vaccinated against hepatitis B. The national program is in place to ensure that babies and adolescents in Australia have access to free hepatitis B vaccine.

The Australian Immunisation Handbook (ATAGI 2018) recommends that the following groups are vaccinated against hepatitis B:

- Infants, children and adolescents.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- People who are immunocompromised, including
  - people living with HIV
  - adult haemodialysis patients and people with severely impaired renal function
  - people about to receive a solid organ transplant and
  - people who have received haematopoietic stem cell transplant.
- People with other medical conditions
  - people with chronic liver disease and/or hepatitis C
  - people who receive certain blood products
  - people with developmental disabilities who attend day-care facilities.
- People at occupational risk, including
  - people who work in any occupation that involves, direct patient care, handling human tissue, blood or bodily fluids or handles used needle and syringes
  - healthcare workers
  - police, members of the armed forces, emergencies services staff and staff of correctional facilities
  - funeral workers, embalmers
  - staff involved in residential and non-residential care of people with development disabilities
  - workers who perform skin penetrating procedures, such as tattooists and body piercers.
- Other groups
  - household or other close contacts of people living with hepatitis B
  - sexual contacts of people living with hepatitis B
  - sexually active men who have sex with men
  - migrants from hepatitis B endemic countries
  - people who inject drugs
  - inmates in correctional facilities
  - sex industry workers.
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For some individuals it may be recommended to have the combined hepatitis A/hepatitis B vaccine.

When should vaccination happen?

Vaccination for hepatitis B is in the form of 3 to 4 injections given at certain intervals over a 6-month period. It is important that you have received the full set of injection to achieve the best level of immunity to hepatitis B.

Children born after 1 May 2000 should have received hepatitis B vaccine shortly after birth while they are in hospital and further doses at 2, 4 and 6 months of age. If you are unsure if this occurred, you should consult your doctor to check for immunity.

Catch-up programs are available for children in Year 7 or adolescents aged between 11 and 15 years receive a two-dose course of adult hepatitis B vaccine given 4 to 6 months apart.

In order to obtain maximum protection against hepatitis B, adults should usually receive three doses of the vaccine at zero, 1 and 6 months intervals. This schedule may vary depending on other health conditions.

A post-vaccination blood test, to assess if the vaccine course has been effective in producing protection against hepatitis B infection, is recommended. This is particularly important for people who have other health conditions or who are immunocompromised.

Side Effects

Side effects of the hepatitis B vaccine are not common, however, a small number of people report pain at the injection site and/or a mild fever after the injections.

What does hepatitis B vaccination cost?

The cost getting hepatitis B vaccination varies around the country with some people able to receive the vaccine for free. This may depend on your level of risk. The vaccination also includes medical consultations, which may incur a cost, unless the doctor bulk bills.

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