WHAT IS HEPATITIS?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver and also refers to a group of viral infections that affect the liver. The most common types of Bloodborne pathogens are hepatitis B virus (HBV) and Hepatitis C Virus (HCV).

HBV is one of several types of viruses (infections) that can cause hepatitis. There is a vaccine that will prevent HBV infection.

HBV infection may occur in two phases. The acute phase occurs just after a person becomes infected, and can last from a few weeks to several months. Some people recover after the acute phase, but others remain infected for the rest of their lives. They go into the chronic phase and become "chronic carriers". The virus remains in their liver and blood.

Acute hepatitis B usually begins with symptoms such as loss of appetite, extreme tiredness, nausea, vomiting, and stomach pain. Dark urine and jaundice (yellow eyes and skin) are also common, and skin rashes and joint pain can occur. Over half of the people who become infected with HBV never become sick, but some may later have long-term liver disease from their HBV infection.

HBV is passed from one person to another in blood or certain body secretions. This may occur during sexual relations or when sharing things like toothbrushes, razors, or needles used to inject drugs. A baby can get HBV at birth from its mother. A doctor or nurse may get HBV if blood from an infected patient enters through a cut or accidental needlestick.

Those people infected with HBV who become “chronic carriers” can spread the infection to others throughout their lifetime. They can also develop long-term liver disease such as cirrhosis (which destroys the liver) or liver cancer.

WHO BECOMES A CHRONIC CARRIER OF HBV?

Of every 100 young adults who catch HBV, 6 - 10 become chronic carriers. Children who become infected with HBV are more likely to become chronic carriers than adults. Of every 10 infants who are infected at birth, up to 9 will become chronic HBV carriers. The younger a child is when the infection occurs, the more likely that child will become a carrier.

Hepatitis B carriers may develop a disease called “chronic active hepatitis”. People with chronic active hepatitis often get cirrhosis of the liver, and many die from liver failure. In addition, they are much more likely than other people to get cancer of the liver.

HEPATITIS B VACCINE

Hepatitis B vaccine is given by injection. Three doses, given on three different dates, are needed for full protection. Currently for adults and those who are presumed to be at risk of occupational exposure to human blood receive a first injection, the second injection one month later and the third 5 months later from the second injection.

Unvaccinated employees who experience an exposure incident may receive a first dose of HBIG and then begin the HBV vaccination series. HBIG will offer some protection during the first 3 months until the vaccine takes over to give long-lasting protection. A doctor or nurse should make the decision whether an employee should receive HBIG in conjunction with the vaccination series.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS FROM HEPATITIS B VACCINE AND PREGNANCY

The most common side effect of hepatitis B vaccination is soreness where the shot is given. Tenderness at the injection site has been reported or become irritable. As with any drug, there is a slight chance of allergic or more serious reactions with either the vaccine or HBIG shot. A person cannot get hepatitis B or AIDS from a hepatitis B shot or from an HBIG shot.

HCV is the same as HBV, and is most common chronic Bloodborne infection. HCV is not efficiently transmitted sexually, it is transmitted only through blood contact in the workplace.

HCV causes liver damage, cirrhosis or liver cancer.

HCV has been named the silent epidemic, because it is generally asymptomatic for decades after infection. The risk of acquiring hepatitis C from the workplace depends on the amount of exposure to blood or blood products and needlestick injuries. In general, occupational groups with increased risk include laboratory workers who are repeatedly exposed to blood and who are at risk of needlestick injuries.

The common tests for hepatitis C are the antibody test, such as liver function test and liver biopsy test.

There is currently No vaccination and cure for Hepatitis C.

The risk of hepatitis C can be significantly reduced by implementing exposure control guidelines suitable for the specific workplace.