

Hepatitis B Vaccine

Hepatitis B is a serious viral infection that affects the liver and can lead to chronic disease, liver failure, or liver cancer if left untreated. The virus spreads through contact with infected blood or other bodily fluids. Fortunately, the **Hepatitis B vaccine** offers highly effective protection against this disease, and it's an essential part of South Africa's immunisation programme.

What is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is caused by the **hepatitis B virus (HBV)**, which attacks the liver and can cause both acute and chronic infections. While some people can clear the virus on their own, others may develop chronic hepatitis B, which can lead to serious health problems such as:

- **Liver cirrhosis** (scarring of the liver)
- **Liver cancer**
- **Liver failure**

Symptoms of hepatitis B vary and may include:

- **Fatigue**
- **Jaundice** (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- **Abdominal pain**
- **Dark urine**
- **Nausea and vomiting**

Some people, especially children, may not show any symptoms but can still carry and spread the virus.

How Does Hepatitis B Spread?

Hepatitis B is primarily spread through contact with infected blood or bodily fluids, such as:

- **Unprotected sex** with an infected person
- **Sharing needles** or syringes
- **Mother-to-child transmission** during childbirth
- **Contact with open wounds** or cuts

In South Africa, the virus can spread more easily in settings where healthcare services are limited or through unsafe medical practices. This is why vaccination is so important to prevent the spread of hepatitis B.

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Why is the Hepatitis B Vaccine Important?

The **Hepatitis B vaccine** is one of the most effective ways to prevent infection. It protects not only individuals but also helps reduce the overall spread of the virus in communities. In South Africa, the vaccine is part of the **Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI)** and is given to infants shortly after birth to provide lifelong protection.

The vaccine is also recommended for:

- **Healthcare workers**, as they are at higher risk of coming into contact with infected blood.
- **People with multiple sexual partners** or those in high-risk groups.
- **Individuals living with someone who is infected** with hepatitis B.

Since **chronic hepatitis B** often develops in people who are infected at birth or during childhood, vaccinating babies and children is critical to controlling the spread of the virus.

When Should You Get the Hepatitis B Vaccine?

In South Africa, the **Hepatitis B vaccine** is part of the routine immunisation schedule. The vaccine is typically given in three doses:

1. **At birth**
2. **At 6 weeks**
3. **At 14 weeks**

This schedule ensures that babies develop strong immunity against the virus. For adults who have not been vaccinated as children, it's never too late to get the vaccine. The three-dose schedule applies to both adults and children.

Is the Hepatitis B Vaccine Safe?

Yes, the **Hepatitis B vaccine** is very safe. It has been widely used around the world for decades, with millions of doses administered each year. The vaccine is made from a small part of the virus, not the live virus itself, so it cannot cause hepatitis B.

Like all vaccines, there may be mild side effects, such as:

- **Soreness** at the injection site
- **Mild fever**
- **Tiredness**

These side effects usually go away within a day or two. Serious side effects are extremely rare, and the benefits of vaccination far outweigh any potential risks.

References:

1. [South African Department of Health](#)



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