

News story: Current global shortage of hepatitis B vaccine

Public Health England, working with NHS England, the Department of Health and the manufacturers, have put in place a series of measures so that the NHS and other providers can use the available vaccine for those at highest immediate risk. Measures are expected to continue until the beginning of 2018 and will be kept under review.

The risk of catching hepatitis B infection in the UK is very low.

In the UK, vaccination is usually offered to individuals who are at specific risk of being exposed to blood from an infected person. This includes babies born to mothers who are infected with hepatitis B, the sexual partners of infected individuals and a range of other groups such as men who have sex with men, healthcare workers, and people who inject drugs. Vaccination is also recommended for people who will be undertaking certain activities overseas.

A course of hepatitis B vaccine usually involves 3 doses of vaccine, completed over a few months. While supplies are limited, vaccine will be prioritised for those at highest immediate risk based on their doctor's assessment. For other people, a doctor may advise that hepatitis B vaccine can be deferred until later.

Hepatitis B virus is found in the blood and bodily fluids, such as semen and vaginal fluids, of an infected person. It cannot be spread by kissing, holding hands, hugging, coughing, sneezing, or sharing crockery and utensils.

Individuals can reduce their risk of contracting hepatitis B by taking care to:

- avoid having unprotected sex
- not inject drugs, or by not sharing needles when injecting
- avoid having tattoos, piercing or acupuncture when overseas
- avoid accessing medical or dental care in high prevalence countries

Vaccination will still be available, as now, for those who have already been exposed to hepatitis B. Such people should seek urgent medical attention as the infection can still be prevented if treated promptly after the incident.

The recently announced addition of hepatitis B protection to the routine childhood immunisation programme at 2, 3 and 4 months will go ahead. The combined vaccine, which protects against hepatitis B and 5 other diseases, is not affected by this shortage.

Long term hepatitis B infection can be symptomless and people who think they may have acquired the infection in the past should seek a test from their healthcare professional.

Further information on hepatitis B is available at www.nhs.uk/conditions/Hepatitis-B/Pages/Introduction.

Further information on how to reduce your risk of catching hepatitis B is available at www.gov.uk/government/publications/hepatitis-b-vaccine-recommendations-during-supply-constraints.

Further advice to travellers is available at travelhealthpro.org.uk/factsheet/50/hepatitis-b.