

Chronic Hepatitis B Treatment Information

The future looks bright for those who are chronically infected with the hepatitis B virus (HBV). People living with chronic hepatitis B infection should expect to live a long and healthy life with proper care and management. There are decisions people can make to protect their livers such as seeing a liver specialist or health care provider regularly, avoiding alcohol and tobacco, eating healthy foods and exercising. There are also approved drugs for both adults and children that control the hepatitis B virus, which can help reduce the risk of developing more serious liver disease and even liver cancer. However, there is still no complete cure and no way to make the HBsAg blood test negative.

Does every patient need to be on medication?

It is important to know that not every person with chronic HBV needs to be on medication. People with active signs of liver disease may benefit the most from treatment, which is determined by a physical exam, blood tests and possibly imaging studies, such as an ultrasound or Fibroscan. All chronically infected people should be seen by their doctor at least once a year (or more frequently) for regular medical follow-up care, whether they start treatment or not. Even if the virus is in a less active phase with little or no damage occurring, this can change with time, which is why regular monitoring is so important.

Treatment and monitoring decisions are based on formal clinical guidelines developed by medical societies such as the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (**AASLD**), European Association for the Study of the Liver (**EASL**), Asian Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver (**APASL**) and the World Health Organization (**WHO**). Talk to your doctor about these guidelines and whether you are a candidate for treatment, or whether there are clinical trials of new HBV drugs that you might be eligible for and could benefit from.

Current treatments for chronic hepatitis B fall into two general categories:

Antiviral Drugs - These are drugs that slow down or stop the hepatitis B virus, which reduces the inflammation and damage to the liver. These are taken as a pill once a day for at least 1 year, usually longer. There are 6 U.S. FDA-approved antivirals, but only three first-line antivirals are recommended treatments: tenofovir disoproxil (Viread/TDF), tenofovir alafenamide (Vemlidy/TAF) and Entecavir (Baraclude). First-line antivirals are recommended because they are safer and most effective. They also have a better resistance profile than older antivirals, which means that when they are taken as prescribed, there is less chance of mutation and resistance. Building resistance makes it harder to treat and control the virus.

Advantages: 1 pill taken daily; few side effects, effective in controlling the virus in most people.

Disadvantages: Treatment is long-term, possibly lifelong.

Immunomodulator Drugs - These are drugs that boost the immune system to help control the hepatitis B virus. They are given as injections over 6 months to 1 year. The most commonly prescribed include interferon alfa-2b (Intron A) and pegylated interferon (Pegasys). This is the only recommended treatment for patients coinfecting with hepatitis delta.

Advantages: Treatment is for a finite, defined amount of time.

Disadvantages: Treatment cost is high; given as an injection; requires close monitoring by a knowledgeable doctor for abnormal blood counts; difficult side effects; does not effectively control the virus long-term for most people.

It is very important to have a knowledgeable doctor carefully evaluate a person to determine if they are a good candidate for interferon-type drugs, and to closely monitor treatment.

You and your doctor will need to discuss the treatment options before deciding which one, if any, is best for you. For many people, these medications will decrease or stop the hepatitis B virus. This results in patients feeling better within a few months because liver damage from the virus is slowed down, or even reversed in some cases, when taken long-term. Although the FDA has approved these drugs for chronic hepatitis B, they do not provide a complete cure. They can, however, significantly decrease the risk of progressive liver damage and decrease the risk of liver cancer from the hepatitis B virus. Antivirals are not meant to be stopped and started, which is why a thorough evaluation by a knowledgeable doctor is so important before beginning treatment for chronic HBV.

What about clinical trials?

Clinical trials are carefully controlled studies that are used to determine whether new drugs, treatments or medical products are safe and effective. People volunteer to participate in these trials as they can provide an opportunity to potentially benefit from the latest advances in medical science. Medical visits, tests and medications are usually provided free of charge.

To learn more about how to find a clinical trial near you, visit the Hepatitis B Foundation Clinical Trials page at www.hepb.org/clinicaltrials.

What about herbal remedies and supplements?

Many people are interested in using herbal remedies or supplements to boost their immune systems and help their livers. The problem is that there is no regulation of companies manufacturing these products, which means there is no rigorous testing for safety or purity. Also, some herbal remedies could interfere with your prescription drugs for hepatitis B or other conditions; some can actually damage your liver or result in liver failure. Always provide your doctor with a list of herbs and supplements you are taking. Check whether the active ingredients in your herbal remedies or supplements are safe for your liver. The most important thing is to protect your liver from any additional injury or harm.

There are many companies that make false promises on the Internet and through social media about their products. Online claims and patient testimonials on Facebook are fake and are used to trick people into buying expensive herbal remedies and supplements. Remember, if it sounds too good to be true, then it's probably not true.

To learn more about herbals and supplements, you can visit the [Hepatitis B Foundation](http://www.hepb.org); National Institutes of Health (NIH) pages on [herbals](#), [Ayurveda](#) and [Traditional Chinese Medicine](#); [National Library of Medicine](#); or [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#).

How can I learn more about treatment for HBV and whether I would benefit?

First, talk to your doctor. If he or she is unfamiliar with the latest treatment advances, contact a liver specialist ("hepatologist") or a doctor who knows how to take care of patients with chronic hepatitis B infection.

Visit the Hepatitis B Foundation for more information:

- Hepatitis B Foundation – www.hepb.org
- HBV Drug Watch – www.hepb.org/drugwatch
- HBV Clinical Trials – www.hepb.org/clinicaltrials
- Directory of Liver Specialists – www.hepb.org/liverspecialist
- Clinical Guidelines for Adults – <http://www.hepb.org/guidelines>