

Hepatitis A & B

What is Hepatitis A and B? Is there a vaccine?

Hepatitis A and B are serious liver diseases caused by the hepatitis A and B viruses. Hep A is usually spread through contact with infected feces, including through oral-anal sexual activity and contaminated food and drink. Hep B is spread through blood and body fluids including vaginal fluids, semen, breast milk, and saliva of individuals carrying the infection.

Hep A and B can be vaccinated separately (ex: Havrix, Engerix B) or together in a combined vaccine (Twinrix). Both kinds take several injections over a period of 6 months.

Who can access these vaccines?

Anyone can access these vaccines if they are willing to pay for them. In fact, Twinrix is primarily advertised as a travel vaccine. However, there are many populations who may access these vaccines for free through Newfoundland and Labrador Public Health.

Public Health offers the Hep B vaccine for free for some high-risk groups, including: “those who inhale or inject street drugs, men who have sex with men, those with numerous sexual partners and those who repeatedly seeking evaluation and treatment for STBBIs.”

Hep B vaccines are a recommended school age vaccine. This program started in 1985 in some provinces, and in 1995 in Newfoundland and Labrador. Currently, the vaccine for Hep B is given in grade 6. You can contact your regional Public Health departments to see if you’ve already been vaccinated.

Hep A, and the combined Twinrix, are not offered through NL Public Health - if you have private insurance, you should check with them for coverage of those vaccines.

How do I get vaccinated?

Doctors, nurse practitioners, and pharmacists can prescribe these vaccines (if you are not looking for public funding). Once prescribed, the vaccine can either be injected at the

pharmacy by a trained pharmacist, or it can be picked up from the pharmacy and brought back to your provider for injection. A pharmacy may charge prescription and/or injection fees in addition to the cost of the vaccine, so call ahead to check with them directly. Publicly funded vaccines must all be prescribed by a doctor or nurse and be requested through Public Health.

Hep A and B vaccines require three injections over 6 months. The first dose is given on Visit 1. The second dose (Visit 2) is given two months from Visit 1. The third dose (Visit 3) is given six months from Visit 1/four months from Visit 2. The Hep B vaccine provided through the school health program is only two doses over six months.

How do I talk to my doctor/nurse about it?

Your provider may not know that this vaccine is publicly funded for your population or how to order it. They also may not know that you fit into a publicly funded category if you have not discussed your sexual activity and/or drug use with them.

If your provider needs to take a history on you, they may ask questions like:

- “How often do you use condoms?”
- “How many sexual partners have you had in the past year?”
- “Do you use IV drugs?”, etc.

It’s important that you answer these questions honestly, so your risk factors can be properly assessed. This information is confidential and is asked to keep you healthy, not to judge.