WHAT IS HEPATITIS B? Hepatitis B is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). HBV is far more infectious than HIV and can be contracted from many sources. People who have not been vaccinated may be at risk of getting infected. About 95 percent of adults will recover within 6 months of becoming infected (acute hepatitis B) and in a small number of cases, they can become chronically infected. Chronic hepatitis B infection is treatable.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS B? You may have hepatitis B and not have any signs or symptoms. Symptoms of HBV infection can include some or all of the following: fatigue, loss of appetite, fever, nausea, vomiting, dark urine, pale stools, stomach pain, and body aches. Most acute HBV infections are asymptomatic and the patient’s only symptom is yellowing of the skin and eyes. About half of the people infected with HBV are asymptomatic. If your baby is born to a mother who has hepatitis B, your infant may be at risk for the infection. If you are pregnant and infected with hepatitis B, it is important for you to know that your infant is at high risk for the risk of developing chronic HBV infection. In Canada, it is estimated that infants born to an infected mother needs to receive a special injection immediately after birth, as well as, the first dose of vaccine within 12 hours of birth to help prevent infection.

Hepatitis B vaccination is the best way to protect yourself against becoming infected. You can also prevent hepatitis B by taking the following precautions:

• Avoid sharing needles/needles, syringes, drug solutions or water; filters, cookers, straws and other drug injection equipment. Cleaning with bleach may not kill HBV. People who use injectable substances to get high should check with a health care provider to see if treatment is right for you. Kicking the habit or getting treatment can cure an acute HBV infection.

• Avoid dental, medical or cosmetic procedures that penetrate the skin (e.g., transplants, acupuncture, piercings) unless the procedures are performed under strict aseptic conditions. If the needles, materials and equipment are sterile, hepatitis B transmission is unlikely to occur in contact with someone else's blood or bodily fluids.

• Do not share personal items like razors, scissors, tattoo needles, or drinking glasses.

• Be especially careful when travelling abroad in countries where HBV is widespread.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF AND OTHERS AGAINST HBV? There is a safe and effective vaccine available to protect you and others from getting hepatitis B. In Canada, all provinces and territories have free hepatitis B vaccination programs for children and certain groups of adults. If you have a chronic or hepatitis B, you may infect others. You can prevent spreading the virus by following the same safe sex, drug behaviour and needle use guidelines as you would if you had acute hepatitis B to prevent you and others from getting hepatitis B. In Canada, all provinces and territories have free hepatitis B vaccination programs for children and certain groups of adults.