HEPATITIS B – TRANSMISSION, SYMPTOMS, AND PREVENTION

Hepatitis B is a very dangerous virus, which infects thousands of health-care workers each year. Annually, 4000 to 5000 deaths can be attributed to occupationally-acquired infections. Hepatitis B can be prevented with the Hepatitis B vaccine. Hepatitis B can be acquired through sexual transmission, mixing of blood or body fluids, or contact with the virus in dried form on environmental surfaces, through cuts, openings in the skin, or contact with mucous membranes.

The Hepatitis B virus can be found in very high concentrations in blood and body fluids, and the virus can live in dried form on environmental surfaces for at least seven days. It is an extremely potent virus, and can cause death or long-term illness.

The best way to protect against Hepatitis B infections is by getting the vaccine, which is available. If you are at risk of exposure in your job, the vaccine will be provided at no cost to you. If you do not get the vaccine, you should know that you may be at increased risk. People should get three doses of the Hepatitis B vaccine according to the following schedule: first dose anytime, second dose at least one month up to 2 months following the first dose, third dose 4 to 6 months after the first dose. The third dose must be given at least 2 months after the second dose and at least 4 months after the first dose. People should not get a Hepatitis B vaccine if they have an allergic reaction to baker’s yeast or to a previous dose of the Hepatitis B vaccine.

People who are infected with Hepatitis B may show no symptoms at all, and may not look or feel sick. However, they are able to give the disease to others. When present, symptoms may include enlargement of the liver, jaundice, fatigue, nausea, abdominal pain, and occasionally joint pain, rash, and fever. Hepatitis B can lead to cirrhosis of the liver or liver cancer. The person with Hepatitis B has an increased chance of contracting Hepatitis D, which is a very serious disease.

The best ways to avoid Hepatitis B are to a) get the vaccine; b) treat ALL blood and body fluids as contaminated; c) take precautions to avoid cuts, splashes to skin, and mucous membranes; and d) handle waste containers and linens as if there may be a hidden needle concealed in them. While gloves and other protective equipment cannot prevent an accidental needle stick, they can protect your skin and mucous membranes, and should ALWAYS be worn when there is a risk of exposure.

Remember, the best way to prevent HBV is by getting the vaccine. Even if you have the vaccine, you should also use all personal protective equipment according to facility policy, and consider ALL blood, body fluids, and other potentially infectious materials as contaminated and capable of transmitting the virus.

If you think that you may have been exposed to HBV, it is important that you follow facility policy, and report any incidents, as well as any illnesses you may experience following the possible exposure.