



VACCINATION AND MEDICAL COVER VITAL IN THE BATTLE AGAINST HEPATITIS B

With an estimated 50% of the population in South Africa having been exposed to the Hepatitis B virus (HBV) at some point in their lives and at least three million people being chronic Hepatitis B carriers, World Hepatitis Day on the 28th of July 2011 provides an opportunity to highlight the steps people can take to win the battle against this disease. These include vaccinations against the virus, conducting regular check-ups and obtaining sound medical cover.

This is according to Dr Dominique Stott, Business Development Executive at PPS, who says that there are many types of Hepatitis viruses such as Hepatitis A, B, C, D, E, F and H, with Hepatitis B virus being the most common cause of viral Hepatitis globally. This virus causes more deaths than all the other types of hepatitis combined. Hepatitis is defined as an inflammation of the liver caused by a number of different causes but viral infections are the most common.”

According to Dr Stott, HBV is 50 to 100 times more infectious than HIV as it can survive on surfaces such as desktops, elevator buttons or stair railings up to seven days, whereas HIV survives for only a few minutes outside of the human body.

Dr Stott advises that the virus is transmitted when blood or body fluids from an infected person enter the body of an unprotected person. “HBV is most commonly spread through intercourse, rough play among children, infection from mother to child during birth, drug abuse, direct contact with a bleeding wound and sharing of tooth brushes, razors or needles.”

Symptoms of HBV can last several weeks and include yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice), dark urine, extreme fatigue, nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain. People can take several months to a year to recover from the symptoms if they recover at all.

She says people who are at high risk of contracting HBV include those who have tattoos done at non-sterile locations, medical staff, people who have household contact with HBV carriers and drug users who share needles.

“The scary thing is that the virus can be so easily spread and carriers of the virus can be spreading it to others unaware they are doing so. The highest number of cases of HBV is in the age group 25 – 40 years, presumably because of higher levels of sexual activity.” There is a strong link between the HBV and HIV infection however the HBV is by far easier to transmit than HIV both sexually and by needleprick injuries.

Dr Stott says that if HBV is left untreated it can cause chronic liver infection that can later develop into cirrhosis of the liver or liver cancer. “Chronic HBV can be treated with drugs, including interferon and anti-viral agents, which can help some patients but it is very expensive. When HBV leads to liver cancer, chemotherapy or surgery is needed to prolong the life of the individual. Patients with cirrhosis often require liver transplants.”

Dr Stott says that all of the treatments for HBV are highly costly which makes it extremely beneficial to have sound medical and dread disease cover in place to pay for necessary treatments and lifestyle changes. “Dread disease cover would best enable full financial cover against HBV as it usually has a specific liver failure benefit allowing for liver transplants.”

“All South Africans must ensure they and their children are sufficiently vaccinated against HBV and conduct regular blood tests during checkups, especially if symptoms appear. In order to be financially prepared it is always best to have a good medical aid and dread disease cover in place,” concludes Dr Stott.