



Doctors are told to use hepatitis B vaccine sparingly because of global shortage

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Doctors have been told to use the hepatitis B vaccine sparingly, and only for people at highest immediate risk of infection, because of a global shortage.

Public Health England—with NHS England, the Department of Health, and the manufacturer GlaxoSmithKline—said that the measures are expected to last until the beginning of 2018.

Guidance from Public Health England says that the highest priority for vaccination are babies born to mothers infected with hepatitis B, because they have the highest risk of infection from being exposed to a substantial amount of infected blood.¹

Next, people who think that they may have been exposed to hepatitis B should have an individual risk assessment to assess their likelihood of infection. Risk can vary depending on the hepatitis B status of the source or, if this is unknown, the prevalence in the implicated population, the recipient's hepatitis B immune status, and the mechanism and route of transmission—whether it is a significant exposure, the likely infecting dose, and the volume of potentially infected blood or bodily fluid.

The guidance says that the hepatitis B vaccine is unlikely to be available simply for travel to areas where the risk of exposure is higher than in the UK. Patients, including travellers to hepatitis B endemic countries, should be reminded that they can reduce their risk of exposure by avoiding contact with blood and bodily fluids—for example, by practising safe sex, by

disposing of sharps safely, by avoiding tattooing, piercing, and acupuncture, and by not sharing needles or shaving equipment.

The shortage does not affect the addition of hepatitis B protection to the routine childhood immunisation programme announced in July.² Babies born on or after 1 August 2017 will receive the hexavalent vaccine Infanrix hexa, which protects against diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, hepatitis B, poliomyelitis, and disease caused by *Haemophilus influenzae* type b (Hib). This replaces the pentavalent infant vaccines Infanrix-IPV+Hib and Pediacel.

A spokesperson for GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) said, “GSK has a global shortage of hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and combination hepatitis A and B vaccines. This is due to reduced manufacturing capacity for hepatitis A and B antigens, which we are working hard to return to normal supply.

“GSK is working closely with the Department of Health and Public Health England to secure supply, to ensure that high risk adults and children are not affected and continue to get access to these vaccines.”

- 1 Public Health England. Hepatitis B vaccination in adults and children: temporary recommendations from 4 August 2017. Aug 2017. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/635669/Hepb_vaccine_temporary_recommendations_August2017.pdf.
- 2 Torjesen I. UK adds hepatitis B to infant vaccination schedule. *BMJ* 2017;358:j3357. doi: 10.1136/bmj.j3357 PMID:28694306.

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