

Infection Prevention and You



Hepatitis

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver that may be caused by viruses, drugs, alcohol, or some hereditary or immune problems. The most common types of hepatitis are A, B, and C. In the United States, the most common type of viral hepatitis is hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a viral disease that is caused by the hepatitis C virus. An infection with this virus causes the immune system to attack healthy cells of the liver. Many people who have hepatitis C experience the following symptoms:

- Jaundice (yellowing of the eyes or skin)
- Poor appetite
- Fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dark urine
- Clay colored stools
- Joint pain

Some people will have few or even no symptoms of infection.

Hepatitis C is a serious illness. About 75 to 85 percent of people infected with hepatitis C will develop a chronic, long-term illness. About 60 to 70 percent of patients with chronic hepatitis C will develop liver disease, from 5 to 20 percent will develop cirrhosis of the liver and 1 to 5 percent will develop liver cancer.

Many people may experience no symptoms of this viral infection until liver damage begins to appear. Even though a person may not have symptoms, they may still be able to spread the virus to others. Hepatitis C is spread when infected blood enters another's bloodstream. This can happen in many ways including:

- Getting a tattoo with a contaminated needle
- Sharing dirty needles
- Having sexual contact with someone who has hepatitis C (in rare cases)
- From mother to child at birth
- Blood or organ transfusions (rare since 1992)

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is also a viral infection that is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). Symptoms of hepatitis B are similar to the symptoms of hepatitis C listed above. Like hepatitis C, hepatitis B is transmitted when blood, semen, or another body fluid from a person infected with the hepatitis B virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. This can happen through sexual contact; sharing needles, syringes, or other drug-injection equipment; or from mother to baby at birth. For some people, hepatitis B is an acute, or short-term, illness but for others, it can become a long-term, chronic infection. Risk for chronic infection is related to age at infection. Approximately 90 percent of infected infants become chronically infected, compared with 2 to 6 percent of adults. Chronic hepatitis B can also lead to serious health issues, like cirrhosis or liver cancer.

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Neither hepatitis B nor C is spread by sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing or sneezing.

Prevention and treatment of hepatitis B and C

There is an effective vaccine to prevent hepatitis B. In the United States, hepatitis B vaccine is given to all newborns, dramatically decreasing the number of new cases. The hepatitis B vaccine is safe and effective and is usually given as 3 to 4 shots over a 6-month period. There is, however, no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.

Several new antiviral medications have been made available to treat the chronic forms of hepatitis B and C and have been proven effective even in people with liver disease.

It is important to consult with your physician about the use of these medications. Being monitored by a physician who is an expert in liver diseases is important to be sure the most effective treatment is prescribed.

Additional resources

Hepatitis A—APIC consumer alert <http://www.apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=traveling-this-summer-pack-more-than-just-you>

Hepatitis C screening for baby boomers—APIC consumer alert <http://www.apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=hepatitis-c-screening-for-baby-boomers>

Hepatitis and dialysis—APIC consumer alert <http://www.apic.org/For-Consumers/Monthly-alerts-for-consumers/Article?id=hepatitis-and-dialysis>

Hepatitis B—The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hbv>

Hepatitis C—The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/>

Hepatitis B and C treatments—U.S. Food and Drug Administration
<http://www.fda.gov/forpatients/illness/hepatitisbc/ucm408658.htm>

The Hepatitis B Foundation <http://www.hepb.org/index.html>

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