

Education

Viral Hepatitis

What is viral hepatitis?

Viral hepatitis is an infection of the liver by a virus. The liver becomes inflamed. Often it is tender and swollen.

The most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Each of these types of hepatitis is caused by a different virus. Another virus--the delta hepatitis virus--causes hepatitis only if you are already infected with hepatitis B.

How does it occur?

The viruses that cause each type of hepatitis are spread in different ways.

- The hepatitis A virus can be spread by contact with infected bowel movements. An infected person may pass this type of hepatitis to others by not washing his or her hands, especially after using the bathroom. You might get the virus from food handled by an infected person, water contaminated with sewage, or shellfish taken from contaminated waters.
- You can get hepatitis B or C by direct contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected person. For example, you can get it from having unprotected sex with someone infected with hepatitis B or C or by sharing needles for piercing, tattooing, or drug injection.

Viral hepatitis can be spread by people who do not have any symptoms and may not know they carry the virus. These people are called asymptomatic carriers.

What are the symptoms?

Depending on the type of hepatitis you have, you may not notice any symptoms of illness for weeks or months after you are infected with the virus. Or you may never have any obvious symptoms.

If you have symptoms, the illness usually begins with these flulike symptoms:

- loss of appetite
- fever
- general aching
- tiredness.

Other possible early symptoms are:

- itching with or without hives
- painful joints
- loss of taste for cigarettes if you are a smoker.

After several days you may also have some of these symptoms:

- nausea and vomiting
- foul breath and bitter taste in the mouth
- dark, brown urine
- yellowish skin and eyes (jaundice)
- pain just below the ribs on your right side, especially if you press on that part of your abdomen
- bowel movements that are whitish or light yellow and may be looser than normal.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your medical history and your symptoms. Your provider needs to make sure that liver inflammation is not from the side effects of medicines you are taking or from the abuse of drugs such as alcohol.

Your provider will examine your skin and eyes for signs of hepatitis. Your provider will check your abdomen to see if the liver is enlarged or tender.

You may have lab tests:

- blood tests, including tests to see what type of hepatitis you have
- urine tests.

How is it treated?

The usual treatment is rest and having a healthy diet. In addition, your health care provider will recommend that you avoid alcohol for at least 6 months. Usually it is not necessary to stay at the hospital.

Doctors are continuing to search for the best ways to treat hepatitis. Antiviral drugs, such as interferon, may be used for some types of viral hepatitis. As new information becomes available, treatments change. You should discuss possible new treatments with your health care provider.

How long will the effects last?

It usually takes 1 to 3 months to recover from an acute case of hepatitis.

Hepatitis B or C can become chronic, causing inflammation of the liver that lasts longer than 6 months. These 2 types of hepatitis can lead to cirrhosis, which damages the liver. In severe cases, the liver becomes permanently scarred and cannot work normally. Infection with the hepatitis B or C viruses also increases your risk for liver cancer.

How can I take care of myself?

- Follow your health care provider's instructions for taking medicine to relieve your symptoms. When you have hepatitis, you need to avoid taking certain medicines (for example, acetaminophen). Ask your health care provider which medicines you can safely take for your symptoms (such as itching and nausea).
- Follow your provider's advice for how much rest you need and when you can return to your normal activities, including work or school. As your symptoms improve, you may gradually increase your level of activity. It is best to avoid too much physical exertion until your provider tells you it's OK.
- Eat small, high-protein, high-calorie meals, even when you feel nauseated. Sipping soft drinks or juices and sucking on hard candy may help you feel less nauseated.
- Do not drink alcohol unless your health care provider says it is safe.

What can be done to help prevent viral hepatitis?

You can get shots to help prevent hepatitis A and B. In some cases another type of shot (gamma globulin) may be needed. If you have hepatitis, your health care provider may recommend that your close friends and family get shots to prevent getting hepatitis from you.

To avoid spreading the disease to others:

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after using the restroom.
- Do not share toothbrushes or razor blades with others.
- Avoid sexual contact with others until you are no longer contagious.
- Do not share needles or other drug equipment with others.

If you do not have hepatitis, but someone in your household does, take the following precautions:

- Ask your health care provider if you need to get a hepatitis vaccine or gamma globulin shot.
- Wear disposable gloves if you must have contact with the sick person's bowel movements or body fluids.
- Wash the infected person's clothing and bed linens separately from other laundry. Use very hot water and a strong

- detergent.
- Clean toilets and other bathroom surfaces with a disinfectant. Wear gloves when you clean. If possible, it's safest to have the infected person use a different bathroom from everyone else in the household.

For more information, call or write:

American Liver Foundation Phone: 800-GOLIVER (800-465-4837) Web site: <http://www.liverfoundation.org> Printed information about liver disease and hepatitis, information specialists

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