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**The National Women's Health Information Center**

A project of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health



## Frequently Asked Questions about Hepatitis

### What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is a liver disease. It makes your liver, an important organ in your body, swell up (or become inflamed) and stop working well. A healthy liver helps your body fight infections, stops bleeding, takes drugs and other poisons out of your blood, and stores energy. Hepatitis can be mild and last for a short time or be very serious and cause liver failure and death.

### What causes hepatitis?

Hepatitis is caused by a virus (a germ that causes sickness). Other things can harm the liver, such as alcohol or drug abuse and long-term use of some medications. Hepatitis affects millions of Americans and is a serious health problem in parts of Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.

### What are the different types of hepatitis and how do you get them?

There are 5 types of hepatitis – A, B, C, D, and E – each caused by a different hepatitis virus.

*Hepatitis A* is caused by eating food and drinking water infected with a virus called HAV. It can also be caused by anal-oral contact during sex. While it can cause swelling and inflammation in the liver, it doesn't lead to chronic, or life long, disease. Almost everyone who gets hepatitis A has a full recovery.

*Hepatitis B* is caused by the virus HBV. It is spread by contact with an infected person's blood, semen, or other body fluid. And, it is a *sexually transmitted disease* (STD). You can get hepatitis B by:

- Having unprotected sex (not using a condom) with an infected person.
- Sharing drug needles (for illegal drugs like heroin and cocaine or legal drugs like vitamins and steroids).
- Getting a tattoo or body piercing with dirty (unsterile) needles and tools that were used on someone else.
- Getting pricked with a needle that has infected blood on it (health care workers can get hepatitis B this way).
- Sharing a toothbrush, razor, or other personal items with an infected person.
- An infected woman can give hepatitis B to her baby at birth or through her breast milk.
- Through a bite from another person.

With hepatitis B, the liver also swells. Hepatitis B can be a serious infection that can cause liver damage, which may result in cancer. Some people are not able to get rid of the virus, which makes the infection chronic, or life long. Blood banks test all donated blood for hepatitis B, greatly reducing the risk for getting the virus from blood transfusions or blood products.

*Hepatitis C* is caused by the virus HCV. It is spread the same way as hepatitis B, through contact with an infected person's blood, semen, or body fluid (see above). Like hepatitis B, hepatitis C causes swelling of the liver and can cause liver damage that can lead to cancer. Most people who have hepatitis C develop a chronic infection. This may lead to a scarring of the liver, called *cirrhosis*. Blood banks test all donated blood for hepatitis C, greatly reducing the risk for getting the virus from blood transfusions or blood products.

*Hepatitis D* is caused by the virus HDV. You can only get hepatitis D if you are already infected with hepatitis B. It is spread through contact with infected blood, dirty needles that have HDV on them, and unprotected sex (not using a condom) with a person infected with HDV. Hepatitis D causes swelling of the liver.

*Hepatitis E* is caused by the virus HEV. You get hepatitis E by drinking water infected with the virus. This type of hepatitis doesn't often occur in the U.S. It causes swelling of the liver, but no long-term damage. It can also be spread through oral-anal contact.

## **What are the signs of hepatitis?**

Some people with hepatitis have no signs of the disease. For other people, the most common and early signs of hepatitis are:

- Mild fever.
- Headache.
- Muscle aches.
- Tiredness.
- Loss of appetite.
- Nausea.
- Vomiting.
- Diarrhea.

Later signs of hepatitis, when a person has been infected for some time, are:

- Dark-colored urine and pale bowel movements.

- Pain in the stomach.
- Skin and whites of the eyes turning yellow (*jaundice*).

## Is hepatitis a sexually transmitted disease (STD)?

Some types of hepatitis are STDs. The viruses that cause them are present in a person's blood, semen, and body fluid. Hepatitis A, B, and C all can be passed from an infected person to another during sexual contact. Hepatitis B is the one type of hepatitis that is most often spread through sexual contact. Hepatitis A can be spread through anal/oral contact. Researchers don't know exactly how hepatitis C is spread. But, they do know that hepatitis C is hard to get through sexual contact.

To help reduce your risk of getting hepatitis sexually, use a male condom with every act of vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse. And, talk with your health care provider about getting a vaccine (an injection of a drug that you get when you are healthy that will protect you from getting sick) for hepatitis A and hepatitis B. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

## How is hepatitis treated?

While there is no treatment for hepatitis A, most people who have it recover within a few weeks. Sometimes your doctor may order bed rest and give you medicine to treat symptoms, such as nausea and diarrhea. There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B is treated with two drugs. One of these drugs, *interferon*, is given by injection. Most people get interferon for 4 months. Another drug, called *lamivudine*, is taken by mouth, usually for one year. Sometimes doctors treat people with hepatitis B with both of these drugs. In some people, hepatitis B can cause the liver to stop working over time. When this happens, surgery to *transplant* (take out your liver and put in a donor liver from another person) the liver. There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B. A new drug to treat chronic hepatitis B, *adefovir* (Hepsera), has recently been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Hepatitis C is most often treated with interferon and other special drugs. An improved form of interferon (Pegasys) was recently given FDA approval to treat hepatitis C. Interferon is also used to treat hepatitis D. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. The hepatitis B vaccine protects you from hepatitis D. There is no treatment or vaccine for hepatitis E.

Health care providers suggest bed rest, eating healthy foods, and not drinking alcohol or taking certain medications as the best ways to take care of yourself when you have hepatitis.

## How can I lower my chances of getting hepatitis?

The best way to keep from getting hepatitis A and B is to get a vaccine. The hepatitis A vaccine is given in two doses, 6 months apart. The hepatitis B vaccine is given through 3 injections over 6 months. Babies should get the hepatitis B vaccine in three injections as well – within 12 hours after birth, at age 1 to 2 months, and between ages 6 and 18 months.

To keep from getting hepatitis B, C, and D through sexual contact:

- The best way to prevent hepatitis B, C, and D and any STD is to practice abstinence (don't have sex). Delaying having sex for the first time is another way to reduce your chances of getting an STD. Studies show that the younger people are when having sex for the first time, the more likely it is that they will get an STD. The risk of getting an STD also becomes greater over time, as the number of a person's sex partners increases.
- Have a sexual relationship with one partner who doesn't have any STDs, where you are faithful to each other (meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else).
- Practice "safer sex." This means protecting yourself with a condom EVERY time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. If needed, use only water based lubricants with male and female condoms. For oral sex, use a *dental dam* – a device used by dentists, made out of a rubbery material, that you place over the opening to the vagina before having oral sex. If you don't have a dental dam, you can cut an unlubricated male condom open and place it over the opening to the vagina.

Even though it may be embarrassing, if you don't know how to use a male or female condom, talk to your health care provider. The biggest reason condoms don't work is because they are not used correctly.

- Be aware that condoms don't provide complete protection against STDs. But, they do decrease your chances of getting an STD. Know also that other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms don't protect you from STDs. If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom every time you have sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. Your risk of getting hepatitis increases with the number of partners you have.
- Don't douche. Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This can increase your risk for getting hepatitis.
- Learn how to talk with your partner about STDs and using condoms. It's up to you to make sure you are protected. The organizations in the "For more information" at the end of this FAQ have tips for talking with your partner. You can also talk with your health care provider about this.
- When you are sexually active, especially if you have more than one partner, get regular exams for STDs from a health care provider. Tests for STDs can be done during an exam. And, the earlier an STD is found, the easier it is to treat.
- Learn the common symptoms of hepatitis and other STDs. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have hepatitis or another STD.

Other ways to protect yourself from hepatitis B, C and D include:

- If you are a health care worker or caregiver, always wear latex gloves when in contact with patient's blood, body fluids, or feces.
- Never use a toothbrush, razor, or other personal items of a person who has hepatitis.

To protect yourself from hepatitis A and E:

- Avoid anal-oral contact when having sex
- When traveling to another country, drink bottled water and don't use ice cubes or wash fruits and vegetables in tap water.
- Wash your hands before eating and fixing food. Be sure to wash your hands after using the toilet.
- If you are a health care worker or caregiver and have to touch other people's stool, wear gloves and wash you hands after doing so.

## **For More Information...**

You can find out more about hepatitis by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

National Prevention Information Network

Phone Number(s): (800) 458-5231

Internet Address: <http://www.cdcnpin.org>

### **CDC National STD and AIDS Hotline**

Phone Number(s): (800) 227-8922

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org/NSTD/index.html>

### **National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention**

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/nchstp.html>

### **National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases**

Phone Number(s): (301) 496-5717

Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

### **American Social Health Association**

Phone Number(s): (800) 783-9877

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org>

### **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists**

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org>

### **American Academy of Family Physicians**

Phone Number(s): (913) 906-6000

Internet Address: <http://www.familydoctor.org>

### **Planned Parenthood Federation of America**

Phone Number(s) (800) 230-7526

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Branch**

Phone Number(s): (888) 443-7232

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/index.htm>

### **National Center for Infectious Diseases**

Phone Number(s): (404) 371-5245

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/index.htm>

**Hepatitis Foundation International**

Phone Number(s): (800) 891-0707

Internet Address: <http://www.hepfi.org/>

This FAQ was adapted from hepatitis fact sheets from the National Center for Infectious Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

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*This FAQ has been reviewed by Sarah Landry of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health  
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