

# What you should know About Hepatitis A, B, and C

## More serious than you think

Hepatitis is a disease characterized by inflammation of the liver. Viral hepatitis refers to several common diseases caused by viruses that can lead to swelling and tenderness of the liver. The most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Hepatitis B and C can lead to serious, permanent liver damage.

There are other forms of viral hepatitis that are less common: these include hepatitis D and E, as well as three other lesser-known viruses.

## Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A virus (HAV) is contracted by eating food or drinking water that has been contaminated with human excrement. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) estimates that 150,000 people in the United States are infected each year by hepatitis A. Acute hepatitis A usually resolves itself within 6 months and does not develop into a chronic disease. The CDC lists household or sexual contact, day care attendance or employment, and recent international travel as the major known risk factors for transmission of hepatitis A. Infected food handlers and those who have used contaminated needles are also at risk for transmission.

## Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B virus (HBV) can cause a serious form of hepatitis. This disease is much more common than HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. An estimated 1.2 million Americans are currently chronic carriers of HBV. Hepatitis B may develop into a chronic disease (which means lasting more than six months) in up to 10% of the 200,000 newly infected people each year. If left untreated, the risk of developing cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer is increased in patients with chronic hepatitis B.

## Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C virus (HCV), once known as "non-A, non-B" hepatitis, develops into a chronic infection in up to 85% of the 150,000 newly infected people each year. Currently in the United States, there are approximately 3.5 million Americans who are chronically infected with HCV. Like chronic hepatitis B, if left untreated, the chronic form of HCV has a greater chance of resulting in cirrhosis, liver cancer, or even liver failure. Liver failure due to chronic hepatitis C infection is the leading cause of liver transplants in the United States.

## Cause for concern?

People who are at risk of being infected with hepatitis B or C include health care workers, people with multiple sex partners, intravenous drug users, and hemophiliacs. Anyone who has had a blood transfusion (prior to routine screening of donated blood that began in 1972 for hepatitis B and 1990 for hepatitis C), a non-sterile tattoo or body piercing, and those who are in close household contact with an infected person are also at higher risk of being infected. Hepatitis B or C can even be transmitted by sharing toothbrushes, razors, or nail clippers contaminated with infected blood—although these forms of transmission rarely occur. Infants born to HBV-infected mothers can contract the virus in up to 90% of cases (without vaccination at birth), but HCV is only rarely spread from mother to baby at the time of delivery. However, approximately one third or more of hepatitis A, B, and C cases result from unknown sources. This means that you do not necessarily have to be among the "high risk" groups to become infected with these viruses.

## How viral hepatitis is transmitted

D-Definitely R-Rarely S-Suspected			
Source of Infection	Form of Hepatitis		
	A	B	C
Food/Water	✓		
Between family members	✓	v	•
Within certain institutions	✓	v	
Needle-stick injuries		v	✓
IV drug use (shared needles)		v	✓
Transfusions		v	✓
Hemodialysis		v	✓
Orally	✓		•
Sexually	•	v	
Anal/oral sex	✓	v	•
Mother to child at birth		v	
Body piercing/Tattooing (contaminated needles)		v	✓

### A quiet killer

Most people who get hepatitis B or C have no recognizable signs or symptoms. You can feel and appear perfectly healthy yet still be infected with the disease—and infect others. However, some people do experience flu-like symptoms, such as loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting, fever, weakness, tiredness, as well as mild abdominal pain. Less common symptoms are dark urine and yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice). The only way these diseases can be positively identified is through blood tests.

If you suspect that you have hepatitis or think you have been in contact with an infected person or a contaminated object, consult your healthcare provider as soon as possible.

### Testing 1...2...3...

There are specific tests your doctor can do to identify viral hepatitis A, B, and C. Blood banks also screen donated blood for hepatitis B and C, and notify you if you have tested positive.

- The **hepatitis A test**, if positive, indicates a recent infection, or that you have developed immunity to the virus due to a prior infection.
- The **tests for hepatitis B** (there are several) can identify: (a) whether you are infected, (b) if you are recovering from the disease, (c) if you have a chronic infection, or (d) if you are immune to hepatitis B.
- The **tests for hepatitis C** can show if you are infected with the virus or if you were infected in the past.

**If you do test positive** for hepatitis B or C, there is treatment available that may be helpful. So, if you think you may be infected, be sure to consult your healthcare provider immediately.

## PREVENTION IS YOUR BEST BET

Hepatitis can be avoided. You should always practice safe sex and never share objects such as needles, razors, toothbrushes, nail files, and clippers. When getting a manicure, tattoo, or body piercing, make sure sterile instruments are used. Those who are exposed to blood in their work, such as health care workers, laboratory technicians, dentists, surgeons, nurses, emergency service workers, police officers, fire fighters, paramedics, military personnel, or those who live with an infected individual, should be vaccinated against hepatitis B. You should also consider being vaccinated for hepatitis A if you work at a day care center, come into close contact with someone who is infected, travel to geographic areas that have poor sanitation, or live in an area where there has been a recent outbreak of hepatitis A.

### Don't stop here!

If you think you need more information about hepatitis, ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist. You can also contact the **American Liver Foundation** (ALF) at 1 800 465-4837.

#### **American Liver Foundation**

39 Broadway, Suite 2700

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1-800-GO LIVER (465-4837)

The American Liver Foundation is a national voluntary health organization dedicated to preventing, treating, and curing hepatitis and other liver and gallbladder diseases through research and education.

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