
Hepatitis

Summary

- Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver.
 - The various forms of viral hepatitis are named after different letters of the alphabet and include hepatitis A, B, C, D and E.
 - Immunisation is available for hepatitis A and B.
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Hepatitis means inflammation (swelling and pain) of the liver. The liver is important for a range of functions in the body. These include regulating metabolism, making proteins, storing vitamins and iron, removing toxins and producing bile.

If the liver doesn't work properly, it can cause serious illness or sometimes even death. Hepatitis may be caused by infection, viruses, chemicals, alcohol and other drug use and other factors. Chronic hepatitis means ongoing inflammation of the liver, irrespective of the underlying cause.

The various forms of viral hepatitis are named after different letters of the alphabet. These include hepatitis A, B, C, D and E. They are also sometimes called hep A, hep B, hep C, and so on. While all these viruses affect the liver, they are spread in different ways and have different treatments. The most common types of viral hepatitis in Australia are hepatitis A, B and C.

Other viruses may also cause hepatitis, such as the yellow fever virus and the virus that causes glandular fever.

Symptoms of hepatitis

Not everyone with hepatitis has symptoms. Generally speaking, when symptoms occur, they may include:

- fever
- nausea
- abdominal discomfort
- dark urine
- lethargy (tiredness)
- painful joints
- oedema (swelling)
- easy bruising
- jaundice (yellow skin and eyes).

Hepatitis A

Anyone can be infected if they come in direct contact with the **hepatitis A** virus through food, drinks or objects contaminated by the faeces (poo) of an infected person.

Symptoms may last several weeks but the person usually recovers completely. Infection with hepatitis A will give lifelong immunity. However, this doesn't offer immunity against the other types of hepatitis. A vaccine is available to protect against hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B virus is spread when blood, semen, vaginal secretions or other body fluids from someone infected with hepatitis B enter the bloodstream of someone who is not infected with hepatitis B.

Activities that might enable the spread of hepatitis B include unsafe sex, or the use of unsterile injecting equipment.

Hepatitis B can also be passed from mother to child, either through the womb (rarely), at the time of birth or shortly after birth.

People who are exposed to the hepatitis B virus may develop long-term hepatitis B, (where the virus stays in their body for their entire life). Babies and children who become infected are far more likely than adults to develop long-term hepatitis B.

A highly effective and safe vaccine is available to prevent **hepatitis B infection**. It is included in the standard immunisation schedule, beginning in infancy. Screening the mother before birth can prevent infection of newborn infants. If a mother tests positive, hepatitis B immunoglobulin is given to the baby when it is born, as well as a hepatitis B vaccination.

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that is spread when blood from a person with hepatitis C enters another person's bloodstream. In Australia, the most common way it is transmitted is through sharing unsterile injecting drug equipment.

Around 20 to 30 per cent of people who become infected with hepatitis C may clear the virus from their blood with no treatment. These people no longer have hepatitis C and cannot pass it on.

Around 70 to 80 per cent of people with hepatitis C, if untreated, continue to have the virus in their blood and are likely to have chronic hepatitis C. Of these, about 10 to 20 per cent will develop **cirrhosis**, which is serious scarring of the liver. This can take 20 years or more to develop. A small number of people with cirrhosis may develop **liver cancer**.

Treatment with direct-acting antiviral medicines has greatly improved the outcomes for people with hepatitis C. These treatments can help decrease inflammation in the liver and can clear the virus in up to 90 per cent of people, and there are minimal side effects.

There is no vaccine available to prevent hepatitis C infection.

Hepatitis D

Hepatitis D infection is uncommon in Australia, but is prevalent in countries that have a high incidence of hepatitis B.

Hepatitis D virus can be acquired either as a co-infection (occurs at the same time) with hepatitis B virus or as a super-infection in people who are hepatitis B positive.

You can get hepatitis D through unsafe sex, sharing unsterile injecting equipment and other activities where the blood of an infected person enters your bloodstream.

Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E is most common in developing countries. There is no chronic (long-term) infection associated with this virus. Hepatitis E is more severe among pregnant women, especially in the third trimester.

The hepatitis E virus is found in the faeces of infected people and animals and is spread by eating or drinking contaminated food or water. Transmission from person to person occurs less commonly than with hepatitis A virus.

Pregnant women from Australia are strongly advised not to travel to areas where there is a lot of hepatitis E, especially during the last three months of pregnancy.

Diagnosis of hepatitis

Tests used to diagnose hepatitis may include blood tests and a liver ultrasound or fibroscan (a quick and non-invasive test that uses ultrasound to measure the 'stiffness' of your liver).

Treatment for hepatitis

Treatment depends on the type of hepatitis. Talk to your doctor about the treatment that is recommended for you. Chronic viral hepatitis, whether due to hepatitis B or C, can, after many years, lead to cirrhosis and primary cancer of the liver.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Local council immunisation service
- **Communicable Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance**, Department of Health and Human Services, Victorian Government Tel. **1300 651 160**
- **Hepatitis Victoria Infoline** Tel. **1800 703 003**
- **Hepatitis Victoria** Tel. **(03) 9380 4644**
- **DirectLine** Tel. **1800 888 236** – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral (including information about where to get clean needles and syringes)
- **National Immunisation Hotline** Tel. **1800 671 811**

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