



UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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Hepatitis

What is Hepatitis?

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by viruses, bacteria, drugs, and toxic agents. In the United States, viruses are a major cause of hepatitis. Most commonly seen are Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. Other viral infections such as Hepatitis D, E, and G are less common in this country, but are prevalent in other parts of the world.

Symptoms of Hepatitis

Characteristic symptoms of acute hepatitis include dark, tea-colored urine, light colored stools, and yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes (jaundice). Other symptoms are more general and flu-like: fever, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal pain.

How do you get Hepatitis?

Transmission of Hepatitis depends on the type of virus:

Hepatitis A is primarily transmitted through contact with contaminated food, water, and person to person contact. There is no specific treatment for this virus, and 99% of those infected will recover without any serious after effects.

Hepatitis B is spread through blood and body fluids. Contact may occur directly or indirectly through infected blood, syringes, needles, and sexual activity as well as during birth when the infected mother passes the virus to her baby.

Hepatitis C is primarily contacted through infected blood: i.e., blood transfusions, unclean equipment, IV drug abuse. Sexual transmission is less common than with Hepatitis B.

Hepatitis B and C are NOT spread by: sneezing, coughing, holding hands, kissing on the cheek or closed mouth kissing, using the same bathroom, or holding a child in your arms.

How do you prevent Hepatitis?

These guidelines will help prevent Hepatitis:

- wash hands carefully with soap and water before handling food or eating, after using toilet, after contact with urine, feces, or blood
- avoid eating raw shellfish, oysters, clams
- avoid sharing personal items such as eating utensils, toothbrushes, razors, towels
- body piercing and tattooing should be avoided
- use of condoms may reduce the risk of transmission of Hepatitis B and C
- routine laundering of clothes
- washing of dishes in hot, soapy water
- Items soiled with an infected person's blood should be disposed of in a sealed plastic bag. Spills of blood or other body fluids should be cleansed with Lysol II.

What is a Hepatitis Carrier?

About 10% of people who contact Hepatitis B become carriers. The risk of becoming a carrier with Hepatitis C is unknown. A carrier is a person who may have no symptoms, but harbors Hepatitis B or C in his/her blood and other body fluids. These people may not know that they carry the virus and can transmit the disease to their sexual partners or others who have contact with their blood. These people may also develop chronic liver disease including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Is there a vaccine available?

Vaccines are available for Hepatitis A and B. There is NO vaccine for Hepatitis C available at this time.

Hepatitis A vaccine is a safe and effective way to prevent against infection. The vaccine is made from a killed virus and is given in a series of two shots 6-12 months apart. Persons recommended to get this vaccine include: travelers to the developing world, persons who live in communities with high rates of hepatitis A, and persons with chronic liver disease. Side effects from this vaccine have been minimal.

Hepatitis B vaccination is the best way to protect against this infection. The immunizations involve three injections over a period of six months. This vaccine is now recommended for all individuals.

If you want to learn more information or are unsure if you should get vaccinated, speak with your nurse or doctor.

Revised 12.06

Published for the University of Maryland community.

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