Viral Hepatitis A to E

Information for patients and families

Read this pamphlet to learn about:

• What viral hepatitis is
• What the symptoms are
• How to treat and prevent it

People infected with viral hepatitis can be referred by a family doctor to the Liver Clinic at Toronto Western Hospital (TWH) for treatment advice and follow-up.
What is Viral Hepatitis?

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver, most commonly caused by a viral infection.

At least 5 viruses (A, B, C, D and E) have been found to cause hepatitis.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A virus is found mostly in the feces of the infected person.

The symptoms you show after first coming in contact with Hepatitis A include:

- nausea
- upset stomach
- abdominal (stomach) pain
- yellowing of the whites of the eyes

Some people who have it, especially young children, show no symptoms at all.
How is it spread?

The main way of spreading hepatitis A is by eating food or drinking water contaminated with the virus.

What can be done to prevent it?

Hepatitis A can be prevented through vaccination, which is safe and effective. Travellers travelling to regions where hepatitis A is common should received hepatitis A vaccine prior to their trips.

People with hepatitis A usually recover completely without taking any medication, and they develop lifelong protective immunity against hepatitis A virus. This means once you get it you cannot get it again.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is the most common type of chronic (long-term) liver disease in the world. Hepatitis B virus is very contagious. This means that it is easily spread from person to person.

Most people with chronic hepatitis have no symptoms, but such illness may lead to:

• severe scarring of the liver (cirrhosis)
• liver failure
• liver cancer

This is the reason why people with chronic hepatitis B must have blood tests regularly.
How is it spread?

The main ways of spreading Hepatitis B are:
  • from contact with the blood or bodily fluids of an infected person
  • from sexual intercourse

So hepatitis B is also a sexually transmitted disease. A mother who has the virus may pass the infection to the newborn baby during childbirth.

Who should be tested for Hepatitis B?

The following groups are most at risk and should be tested for hepatitis B:

• Immigrants and their families, especially from regions where hepatitis B is common (such as Asia, Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe, Caribbean and Mediterranean countries)
• Household or sexual contact with people who have hepatitis B
• People with multiple sexual partners
• Men who have sex with men
• People with chronic kidney failure who need dialysis
• People who have used recreational or intravenous drugs
• Inmates
• All pregnant women
• People who need immune modulation therapy such as cancer chemotherapy

People who belong to these groups should take a blood test as soon as possible. If no infection is found, get vaccinated as soon as possible.

If you get infected with the hepatitis B virus at birth or at a young age, the chance of developing into chronic hepatitis is as high as 90%.
If you are infected as an adult, a full recovery is very likely, and the chance of developing into chronic hepatitis is about 5%.
Is there treatment for it?

Current approved medications in Canada to treat hepatitis B are:

- interferon injections
- oral antiviral drugs such as Lamivudine, Entecavir and Tenofovir

Hepatitis B medications only control and do not kill the virus.

Not every person infected with hepatitis B needs to be treated. Please speak with your liver specialist.

Hepatitis C

There are often no symptoms during first contact with the virus or just minor symptoms of flu. But up to 75% of people are unable to clear the virus and will become infected for life.

Chronic hepatitis C may lead to:

- severe scarring of the liver (cirrhosis)
- liver failure
- liver cancer

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C virus is spread through direct blood-to-blood contact, for example sharing contaminated needles between drug users.

Hepatitis C can also be spread from sexual intercourse, but it is less common in monogamous relationships.
Is there treatment for it?

Hepatitis C is curable with treatment.

Treatment has advanced in recent years. Current approved treatment is a combination of interferon injections and pills. Newer therapies and therapies that do not use interferon are expected to become available in the next 1 or 2 years.

Talk with your doctor about what treatment is the best for you.

Hepatitis D

Hepatitis D virus is considered a defective virus because it cannot live on its own. It needs hepatitis B virus to survive. This means that hepatitis D virus infection can only happen in people infected with hepatitis B.

Being infected with hepatitis B and D virus is a serious liver disease.

Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E virus is more common nowadays in both developing and developed countries.

How is it spread?

It is spread in ways that are similar to hepatitis A virus. Pregnant women with hepatitis E can die from this virus infection. Currently there is no treatment for hepatitis E.
What can be done to prevent it?

It is very important to use good hand hygiene. Clean your hands well after using the bathroom.

This educational brochure is co-developed by:
TWH Liver Centre and
Toronto Chinese Health Education Committee
Hepatitis Subcommittee

To reproduce this brochure, please contact:
Colina Yim – Nurse Practitioner at TWH
Phone: 416 603 5800 extension 5976 or

Miu Lin Wong – Health Promotion Coordinator at TWH
Phone: 416 603 5800 extension 2661

Toronto Chinese
Health Education Committee (TCHEC)