

Let's Talk About...

Viral hepatitis

Hepatitis occurs when a virus or something else irritates the liver and causes injury. The disease can be mild or very severe. About half the people with hepatitis have no symptoms and may not know they have it.

How does a person get viral hepatitis?

Hepatitis viruses are the most common source of inflammation of the liver. A, B, and C are the most common hepatitis viruses, but be aware that there are more than 3 hepatitis viruses.

Hepatitis A

The virus that causes Hepatitis A (hep A) leaves the body through stool (poop). You can get the virus if you handle body wastes. Hep A is most common among young adults, school-age children, and children who go to day care. Childcare facilities are particularly at risk because children's symptoms are milder than adults'. Hep A can spread more easily to another person during the first 1–3 weeks, before the infected person is sick. A vaccine prevents hep A.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B (hep B) is passed from one person to another in blood or other body fluids. It affects people of any age. A mother with hep B can give her baby hep B before or at birth. The virus can also be passed through semen. A person having sexual intercourse with a partner who has hep B may get the disease.

Hep B often becomes chronic (long lasting) in infants and less often in older children and adults. It may lead to liver damage, or cirrhosis (sir-OH-sis), and possibly liver cancer. Children with hep B often won't have symptoms but can infect other people for many years.

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C (hep C) is passed from one person to another in blood or other body fluids. Infants born to

mothers with hep C are at a higher risk of getting hep C along with people who inject illicit drugs.

What does viral hepatitis look like?

Someone with viral hepatitis may have a fever, lose their appetite, have nausea, be tired, and have an overall "bad feeling." They may develop dark urine, yellow eyes, yellow-looking skin, and light or clay-colored stools. These symptoms slowly disappear in 1–5 weeks. However, a person with viral hepatitis may continue to tire easily for several more weeks or possibly months. Some people do not develop any symptoms.

How do I prevent viral hepatitis?

The best and easiest way to prevent viral hepatitis is washing your hands often. Everyone, whether infected or not, should wash their hands before and after going to the toilet, preparing food, and before eating. Careful hand washing after diaper changes is very important (see figure 1).

If your child has been playing with another child who has hepatitis, talk to your child's doctor. Children often put things in their mouths and do not wash their hands often. Find out how much contact your child had with the playmate who has hepatitis. Exposure means repeated, close contact, such as between household members. Contact with a person infected with hepatitis at school, work, or occasional visits to their home is generally not enough to get hepatitis.

The best way to prevent hep A and B is to get the vaccinations. Children exposed to hep A who did not receive the immunization may be given a gamma globulin shot. This shot only helps if given in the first 2 weeks of infection. If a child has hep A, all their household contacts and intimate playmates need gamma globulin, too.

Hand washing with soap and water

Figure 1



Wet hands with warm, running water.



Apply liquid soap or use a clean bar of soap. Lather well.



Rub your hands together vigorously for at least 20 seconds. Be sure to scrub all surfaces of your hands and fingers.



Rinse well. Dry your hands with a clean or disposable towel.



Use a towel to turn off the faucet.

Hand washing with a hand-rub product



Use a product that contains at least 60% alcohol. Apply product to the palm of your hand. Read the product label to see how much to apply.



Be sure to cover all surfaces of your hands and fingers.

Rub your hands together until they are dry.



Hepatitis A Immunization

All babies should receive two doses of the hep A (HAV) vaccines starting at one year old. These doses are given 6 months apart and will prevent hep A infection.

Hepatitis B Immunization

All babies should receive the hep B virus (HBV) vaccine. This will prevent the hep B infection and keep your child from carrying the virus long term carrier. Vaccination starting at birth or soon after birth will protect your child against HBV through adulthood. Talk to your doctor about when to give this shot.

How is viral hepatitis treated?

If you think your child has viral hepatitis, talk to your doctor. The doctor will perform blood tests to see if your child has the disease and if treatment is needed.

There is no specific treatment for viral hepatitis. Usually, doctors recommend rest, a good diet, vitamins, and medicine to control vomiting.

Children who can't keep liquids down may need to go to the hospital.

How can I keep my child hydrated?

Diet

If your child's stomach hurts, offer clear liquids such as Jell-O®, pedialyte, water, or apple juice. When your child has no more stomach aches, you can make them small meals 5–6 times a day. In this way, your child will eat more and will not get as tired.

Your child will need calories to keep up their strength and help the liver heal. Foods should be low in fat. Use skim or 1% milk and very little butter. Trim away all fats from meats, and broil them instead of frying them.

Activity

At first, your child will not feel like doing much. Strength will return slowly. Once the jaundice (yellow skin) has faded, your child may feel well and become active too soon. This causes stress on the liver, and the jaundice may return.

Returning to school

After the jaundice is gone, make an appointment with your child's doctor. The doctor will check your child's blood to see if the liver is returning to normal. They will also tell you when your child can return to school. Limit activities as needed. Remind your child to wash their hands before eating and before and after using the toilet.

Skin care

Jaundice may cause itching. This can be helped with any soothing lotion.

Cleanliness

Everyone in your family must wash their clothes and bed linens with soap and hot water. They must also wash their hands before eating or making food (see figure 1). Ask anyone who touches your child's clothes or bed linens to wash their hands right away. Do not share towels among family members.

What should you expect?

Having hepatitis in your family is no reason to panic or be too upset. Children usually have much milder cases than adults and usually do not suffer any long-lasting effects. The disease is generally mild. The steps above can prevent the disease from spreading. Teens with hepatitis may be worried that friends will think their disease is from drug abuse. You should reassure them and tell their friends about the real source of the infection.

If you have more questions, call your doctor or your local health department.

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