

Let's Talk About...

Viral Hepatitis

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver caused by injury or an infection. Hepatitis caused by a virus is called **viral hepatitis**. Hepatitis viruses A, B, and C are the most common ones in the United States. Viral hepatitis can be mild or very severe. It can last for a short time (acute) or long-term (chronic). About half the people with hepatitis have no symptoms and may not know they have it.

Hepatitis A

The virus that causes hepatitis A leaves the body through poop (stool). You can get the virus if you come into contact with food or water that was contaminated with body waste. Hepatitis A is most common among young adults, school-age children, and children who go to day care. Childcare facilities are particularly at risk because a child's symptoms are milder than an adult's. Hepatitis A can spread easily to another person during the first 1 to 3 weeks of infection, before a person knows they are sick.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is passed from one person to another in blood or other body fluids. It affects people of any age. A mother with hepatitis B can give it to her baby before or during birth. The virus can also be passed through semen and by having sex with a partner who has it.

Hepatitis B often becomes chronic in infants and less often in older children and adults. It may lead to liver damage (cirrhosis [sir-OH-sis]) and liver cancer. Children with hepatitis B often don't have symptoms but can infect other people for many years.

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is most commonly passed from one person to another in blood. Infants born to mothers with hepatitis C are at a higher risk of getting hepatitis C. People who inject illicit drugs are also at high risk.

What are the symptoms of viral hepatitis?

Common symptoms of viral hepatitis include having a fever, not feeling hungry, having belly pain, feeling nauseous (sick to their stomach) and tired, and feeling "bad" overall. They may also have dark urine, yellow eyes, yellow-looking skin, and light or clay-colored poops. These symptoms slowly disappear in 1 to 5 weeks. However, a person with viral hepatitis may continue to get tired easily for several more weeks or possibly months. Some people do not have any symptoms.

How do I prevent viral hepatitis?

The best way to prevent hepatitis A and B is to get the vaccinations. Children exposed to hepatitis A who did not get the vaccine may be given a gamma globulin shot. This shot only helps if given in the first 2 weeks of infection. If a child has hepatitis A, everyone on their household and their most frequent playmates need gamma globulin shots, too.

Hepatitis A vaccine

All babies should have 2 doses of the hepatitis A (HAV) vaccine starting at 1 year old. Doses are given 6 months apart and will prevent hepatitis A infection.

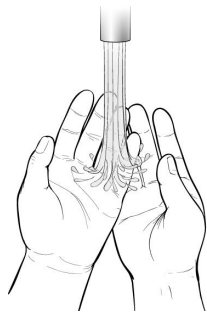
Hepatitis B vaccine

All babies should receive the hepatitis B virus (HBV) vaccine. This will prevent hepatitis B infection and keep your child from carrying the virus long term. 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.

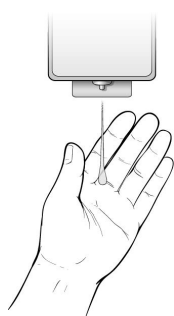
Children who have an autoimmune disease or are taking immunosuppressive medications may need a booster or second shot of this vaccine.

Hand washing with soap and water

Figure 1



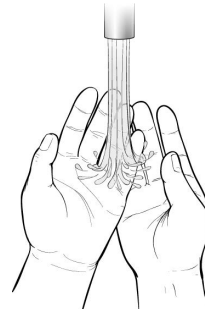
Wet hands with warm, running water.



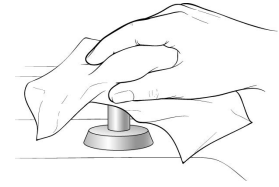
Apply liquid soap or use a clean bar of soap. Lather well.



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

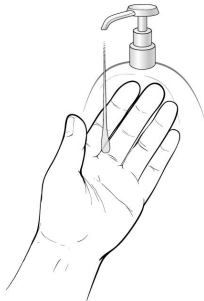


Rinse well. Dry your hands with a clean or disposable towel.



Use a towel to turn off the faucet.

Cleaning hands with a hand sanitizer

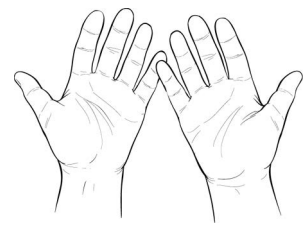


Use a product that contains at least 60% alcohol. Apply product to the palm of your hand. Read the product label to see how much to apply.



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

Rub your hands together until they are dry.



Washing hands

The best and easiest way to prevent the spread of viral hepatitis is to wash your hands—and your child's hands—often. Everyone, whether infected or not, should wash their hands:

- After going to the toilet or changing a diaper
- Before and after preparing food
- Before eating

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 an infected person at school, work, or on occasional visits to their home is generally not enough to get hepatitis.

How is viral hepatitis treated?

If you think your child has viral hepatitis, talk to your child's 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 A. There are special medications to help treat hepatitis C. Some cases of hepatitis B can be treated with medication. Usually, doctors recommend rest, a good diet, and medicine to control vomiting. Children who can't keep liquids down may need to go to the hospital.

How can I help my child heal?

Diet

If your child's stomach hurts, offer clear liquids such as Jell-O, Pedialyte, water, or apple juice. When your child's stomach aches end, you can make them small, healthy meals 5 to 6 times a day. In this way, your child will get the nutrition they need and will not get as tired.

Your child will need calories to keep up their strength and help the liver heal. Low-fat foods may help. Consider giving skim or 1% milk and reducing use of butter and oil. Avoid fried foods.

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.

Going back 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.

Cleanliness

Everyone in your family should wash their hands before eating or making food. As the virus is spread through blood and bodily fluids, it is important to wear disposable gloves when treating a cut or a bloody nose.

Skin care

Jaundice may cause itching. This will go away as the liver heals.

What should you expect?

Having hepatitis in your family is not a reason to panic or be upset. Children usually have much milder cases than adults. The disease is generally mild and they often do not suffer any long-lasting effects.

Follow the steps in this handout to keep the disease from spreading. Teens with hepatitis may be worried that friends will think their disease is from drug use. You should reassure them and their friends about the real source of the infection.

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

Notes

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