

## About hepatitis B and C

### What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver and can be caused by many viruses. The most important are the hepatitis B and hepatitis C viruses. Both these viruses can lead to chronic infection which can cause severe liver damage after a few years. Some people will recover from infection without developing the disease.

### How is hepatitis B transmitted?

In countries with a high incidence of hepatitis B, the virus is often transmitted during pregnancy, childbirth or following contact with infected family members during early childhood. The disease can also be transmitted during unprotected sex and via blood, for example by sharing contaminated syringes. For mother to child transmission, the risk of the child becoming a chronic carrier of the virus is high (approximately 95 %). If adults are infected, the risk is significantly lower (approximately 3-5 %). People with chronic hepatitis B can infect others regardless of whether or not they have symptoms.

### How is hepatitis C transmitted?

Hepatitis C is usually transmitted via blood, and in some countries via blood products and medical equipment in hospitals. The most common transmission route in Norway and in many parts of the world is by sharing contaminated syringes. The disease can be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy or birth, particularly in countries with a high incidence. Transmission by sexual contact is rare but can occur.

### Why is it important to be tested for hepatitis B and C?

It is important to be tested so you can be offered treatment to stop the progress of the disease. It is also important to know if you are infected so you can take precautions to avoid infecting others.

Pregnant women are routinely screened for hepatitis B. Women at increased risk of being infected with hepatitis C should be tested in early pregnancy.

Testing is voluntary.

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis?

The symptoms can be mild or diffuse, and people may have been infected for several years without showing any symptoms. Some people may develop symptoms such as jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin), lethargy, nausea, abdominal pain, discoloured stools or dark urine.

### How can I avoid infection with hepatitis B and C?

Use clean syringes and equipment when injecting drugs to protect against both hepatitis B and hepatitis C. Use a condom to prevent transmission of both hepatitis B and C during sexual contact.

There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B, and people who are particularly exposed can receive this for free. The vaccine can be given to sexual contacts and other close contacts of people with chronic hepatitis B. People with chronic hepatitis B must use a condom if they have sex with people who have not been vaccinated.

The risk of a pregnant woman transmitting hepatitis B infection to her child can be reduced by treating the mother and giving the vaccine and immunoglobulin to the child as soon as possible (within 24 hours) after birth, followed by 4 further vaccine doses during the first year of life.

There is no vaccine against hepatitis C.

### **What follow-up will you get if you are infected with hepatitis B or C?**

Anyone diagnosed with acute or chronic hepatitis B will be referred to a specialist in infection medicine for assessment. Most people who are infected with hepatitis B will recover within a few months. However, it is important that people with chronic hepatitis B are followed up regularly with blood tests to determine if and when treatment should begin to delay the progress of severe liver disease. Treatment will usually not get rid of the virus.

Anyone who is diagnosed with hepatitis C infection should be evaluated by a specialist as early as possible to consider treatment. Treatment for hepatitis C is effective, safe and has few side effects. With successful treatment, you will get rid of the virus, but you will not be protected from re-infection. Pregnant women who are hepatitis C-positive should be followed up in the specialist health service to consider possible treatment after pregnancy.

Screening, treatment and follow-up are free.

The test results will not affect an application for residence in Norway.

Hepatitis A is another virus that can cause acute inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis A usually passes without the need for treatment, and never becomes chronic. Once you have had hepatitis A, you are immune for life. A vaccine against hepatitis A can be given to protect children over 1 year old, adults at risk, and during outbreaks. Hepatitis A is transmitted via contaminated food and water and via blood, for example by sharing contaminated syringes. Hepatitis A can also be transmitted by sexual contact (genital-oral infection), particularly among men who have sex with men.

