

Facts about hepatitis A, B, and C

and how you can prevent being infected

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. When the liver is inflamed, in many cases it cannot effectively break down bilirubin in the body. The increased amount of bilirubin can give a characteristic yellow colour of the eyes and skin. Other symptoms of hepatitis are nausea, stomach pains and fatigue.

The three most important types of hepatitis are hepatitis A, B and C. These illnesses are caused by three different viruses: Hepatitis virus A, hepatitis virus B, and hepatitis virus C. It is not possible to decide which virus a person is infected with, based on the symptoms alone. A blood test is necessary to identify the virus.

This is the way hepatitis usually is transmitted:

Hepatitis A: By contaminated food and drink, and by blood, for instance by sharing unclean syringes and needles. By unclean syringes and needles we mean syringes or needles already used by another person.

Hepatitis B: By unprotected sexual contact and by blood.

Hepatitis C: By blood, for example by sharing unclean needles and syringes.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A was a frequent illness in Norway until about 1945. Today hepatitis A is much less common and most people who get this disease have been infected abroad, or are drug users. As a rule, adults infected with hepatitis A become more seriously ill than children do. The virus is present in the faeces of the infected person. Consequently, hepatitis A is mainly spread through contaminated drinking water, or by food which has been handled by infected persons who have not washed their hands properly. In rare cases, the illness can also be transmitted sexually.

How to avoid being infected:

Wash hands carefully when preparing food and after visiting the bathroom. Avoid drinking water directly from the tap when travelling outside Western Europe and North America. There is a vaccine against hepatitis A. It is recommended that one is vaccinated before travelling outside Western Europe, North America, Japan and Australia. Drug users can get free vaccine, and must avoid using unclean needles and syringes.

Treatment:

Hepatitis A is usually a benign, but troublesome illness that has a good prognosis. It is a disease which never becomes chronic. Once a person has had hepatitis A, he or she becomes immune for the rest of their lives.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is transmitted through blood and body fluids. The illness is fairly common all over the world. In Norway, there are between 10,000 and 15,000 persons who are chronic carriers of the virus.

How to avoid being infected:

Condoms protect against the hepatitis B virus. There is a vaccine against hepatitis B. Drug users can get free vaccine, and must avoid using unclean needles and syringes

Mothers can infect their children during pregnancy and birth. The risk for virus transferral from mother to child can be reduced by giving the child immunoglobulin and vaccine as soon as possible after birth. The child can then be breastfed.

Hepatitis B is found in both acute and chronic forms:

Acute Hepatitis B:

About half of those infected with the hepatitis B virus show symptoms between two and six months after having been infected. Most infected persons are free of the virus after a few months. They will then be immune to hepatitis B for the rest of their lives.

Chronic Hepatitis B:

In the case of about 5 % of those infected with hepatitis B the virus gains a foothold in the liver and produces a chronic infection. Such a chronic infection can be present without symptoms, and can only be detected with blood tests. We call such persons “healthy carriers”. Most people with chronic hepatitis B are healthy carriers, but some of them can develop chronic inflammation of the liver. Over many years this can develop into cirrhosis and increase one’s risk of liver cancer. It is therefore important that people with chronic hepatitis B have their blood tested regularly.

Persons with chronic hepatitis B can infect others, whether they have symptoms or not. No one with chronic hepatitis B can therefore be a blood donor, and household contacts can be given free vaccination against the illness. People with chronic hepatitis B must use condoms if they have sex with people who are not vaccinated.

Treatment:

Occasionally chronic hepatitis B has to be treated with special medicines to prevent the development of serious liver disease. Many people have a recurrence after the treatment is completed, while a few people are completely cured.

Hepatitis C

For many years it was known that there are several hepatitis viruses, but hepatitis C was first discovered in 1989. Now, with the help of a blood test, hepatitis C infection can be detected. There is no vaccine against hepatitis C.

How to avoid being infected:

Most of the people shown to have hepatitis C today have been infected through earlier or current use of needles and syringes, or through blood transfusion many years ago. Today all blood donors are tested for the virus, so that the risk of infection from a blood transfusion is minimal. As with hepatitis B, the most common cause of hepatitis C is the use of contaminated needles and syringes. Sexual transmission occurs very rarely.

Hepatitis C infection usually gives few symptoms, and the illness is mostly discovered through a blood test. Everyone carrying antibodies against hepatitis C will today be viewed as an infectious and chronic carrier of the virus. Whether the virus still resides in the body can only be decided by long-term follow-up and by using special blood tests. Chronic carriers of the hepatitis C virus usually have no symptoms. However, after many years of carrying the virus, some will develop liver damage. It is therefore important that chronic carriers of hepatitis C have their blood tested regularly. In rare cases hepatitis C can be transferred from mother to child during birth. Children born of mothers infected with hepatitis C can be breastfed.

Treatment:

It is occasionally necessary to treat hepatitis C with special medicines, to stop the development of serious liver damage. Many people have a recurrence after the treatment is completed, while a few people are completely cured.

How to avoid infection:

Hepatitis A: Good hand hygiene when preparing food and when visiting the bathroom. Don't drink tap water when abroad.

Hepatitis B: Safe sex. Avoid sharing needles and syringes. Vaccination.

Hepatitis C: Avoid sharing needles and syringes.

All carriers of hepatitis B or hepatitis C must prevent other people being contaminated with the carrier's blood. Blood soil should be disinfected with a chlorine solution. Carriers can not be blood donors.

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