

VIRAL HEPATITIS

Information for Gay and Bisexual Men



What is viral hepatitis?

Viral hepatitis is an infection of the liver caused by one of several viruses. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. While all three types of hepatitis can cause similar symptoms, each virus is spread in different ways.

Are gay and bisexual men at risk for viral hepatitis?

Yes. Among adults, an estimated 10% of new Hepatitis A cases and 20% of new Hepatitis B cases occur in gay or bisexual men. Gay and bisexual men are at increased risk for Hepatitis C if they are involved in high-risk behaviors.

Sharing needles or other equipment used to inject drugs puts a person at risk for Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV. Of people with HIV infection, 10% also have Hepatitis B and 25% also have Hepatitis C. New research shows that gay men who are HIV-positive and have multiple sex partners may increase their risk for Hepatitis C.

How is viral hepatitis spread?

- **Hepatitis A** is usually spread when a person ingests fecal matter—even in microscopic amounts—from an infected person. Among men who have sexual contact with other men, Hepatitis A can be spread through direct anal-oral contact or contact with fingers or objects that have been in or near the anus of an infected person. Hepatitis A can also be spread through contaminated food or water, which most often occurs in countries where Hepatitis A is common.
- **Hepatitis B** is spread when body fluids—such as semen or blood—from a person infected with the Hepatitis B virus enter the body of someone who is not infected. The Hepatitis B virus is 50–100 times more infectious than HIV and is easily transmitted during sexual activity. Hepatitis B also can be spread through sharing needles, syringes, or other equipment used to inject drugs.
- **Hepatitis C** is spread through contact with the blood of an infected person, primarily through sharing needles, syringes, or other injection drug equipment. Hepatitis C can also be spread when getting tattoos and body piercings in informal settings or with non-sterile instruments. Although uncommon, Hepatitis C can also be spread through sexual contact. Having a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or HIV, sex with multiple partners, or rough sex appears to increase a person's risk for Hepatitis C.

The best way to protect yourself from Hepatitis A and B is to get vaccinated.

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How would someone know if they have viral hepatitis?

Many people do not have symptoms, so the only way to know if you have hepatitis is to get tested. Doctors diagnose hepatitis using one or more blood tests, depending on the type of hepatitis.

How serious is viral hepatitis?

Hepatitis A can only be an acute, or a short term, infection which usually lasts no more than 6 months. Most adults with Hepatitis A feel sick for a few months and usually recover completely without lasting liver damage. Although rare, Hepatitis A can cause liver failure and death.

While Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C can also be acute infections, each can also develop into a chronic, or lifelong, infection. Over time, about 15%–25% of people with chronic hepatitis develop serious liver conditions, including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver failure, and even liver cancer.

What are the symptoms of viral hepatitis?

Many people with viral hepatitis do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. For acute hepatitis, symptoms usually appear within several weeks to several months of exposure and can last up to 6 months. Symptoms of chronic viral hepatitis can take decades to develop and people can live with an infection for years and not feel sick. When symptoms do appear with chronic hepatitis, they often are a sign of advanced liver disease.

Symptoms for both acute and chronic viral hepatitis can include: fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, grey-colored stools, joint pain, and jaundice.

How is viral hepatitis treated?

For people with acute hepatitis, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and in certain situations, antiviral medication. In some cases, people with acute hepatitis are hospitalized.

Several treatments are available that can significantly improve health and delay or reverse the effects of liver disease for those with Hepatitis B and new treatments are available for Hepatitis C that can get rid of or clear the virus.

Should gay and bisexual men be vaccinated?

Yes. Experts recommend that all gay and bisexual men be vaccinated for Hepatitis A and B. The Hepatitis A and B vaccines can be given separately or as a combination vaccine. The vaccines are safe, effective, and require 2-3 shots given over a period of 6 months depending on the type of vaccine. A person should complete all shots in the series for long-term protection.

There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C. The best way to prevent Hepatitis C is by avoiding behaviors that can spread the disease, especially sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs.

Should gay and bisexual men get tested for viral hepatitis?

It depends upon the type of hepatitis and a person's risk factors. Testing is not recommended for Hepatitis A.

CDC recommends gay and bisexual men get tested for Hepatitis B. Getting tested can determine if a person is or has been infected with Hepatitis B and if he will need the vaccine series for protection.

Testing for Hepatitis C is not recommended for gay and bisexual men unless they were born from 1945 through 1965, have HIV, or are engaging in risky behaviors.

For more information

Talk to your doctor, call your health department, or visit www.cdc.gov/hepatitis.