

Protecting Yourself Against Hepatitis

Tips For Understanding And Preventing The Disease

(NAPSA)—Hepatitis is a highly contagious disease that attacks the liver. Sometimes it can erupt suddenly with life-threatening symptoms or lie dormant in the body for years causing slow damage to the liver.

“Hepatitis varies in severity, from total recovery to a life-threatening or life-long disease,” said Larry Alexander, MD, of the American College of Emergency Physicians. “The more you know about the disease and its causes, the better you will be able to protect yourself from exposure.”

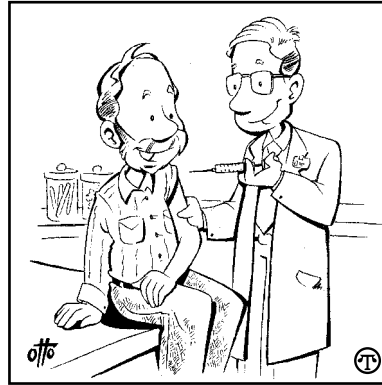
Hepatitis comes in five varieties: A, B, C, D and E. Each has its own characteristics. The hepatitis A virus (HAV) is a highly contagious virus infecting the liver and is spread by putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of a person with hepatitis A, such as ingestion of contaminated food or water. It is the most common type of hepatitis reported in the United States. The symptoms of hepatitis B virus (HBV) have a slower onset than HAV, and can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, liver cancer, liver failure and death.

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) is found in the blood of people who have this disease and can be spread by contact with the blood of an infected person. The hepatitis D virus (HDV) is a defective virus that needs the hepatitis B virus to exist and is found in the blood of people infected by the virus. The hepatitis E virus (HEV) is spread in much the same way as HAV, however, it does not often occur in the United States.

To help stop the spread of this disease, the American College of Emergency Physicians offers these practical tips everyone should know:

Traveling Abroad—Travelers to developing countries, especially pregnant women, are at risk of HEV, HAC and other forms of hepatitis. You should be vaccinated against hepatitis A if you are traveling for long periods of time to countries where epidemics occur. You should be vaccinated at least four weeks before traveling abroad. You also should take the following precautions while on your trip:

- Peel all fresh fruit and vegetables yourself and use bottled water to wash them.
- Avoid raw or undercooked meat and fish.
- Do not use ice cubes in your drinks.
- Only bottled water should be used for brushing teeth and drinking.



- If bottled water is not available, tap water should be boiled for 10 minutes.

Don't Share Needles/Razors/Toothbrushes

Wash Your Hands—Be sure to wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet, changing a diaper or before eating or preparing food. The hepatitis A virus can survive for as long as four hours at room temperature in fecal matter on someone's hand or on a hard surface like a bathroom door handle.

Clean Contaminated Surfaces—Use household bleach (*10 parts water to 1 part bleach*) to clean surfaces contaminated with feces, such as a diaper changing table.

Practice Safe Sex—Hepatitis A can also be spread through unsafe sex.

Get Vaccinated—If you are at risk of being exposed to hepatitis A or B, get vaccinated. Those at risk include children, people with clotting-factor disorders, people with chronic liver disease, people traveling abroad, people who engage in sex with many partners or use injecting-drugs and people whose jobs expose them to blood.

Know the Signs and Symptoms—Some forms of hepatitis have no signs or symptoms. If symptoms are present, they usually occur soon after infection and may include fever, tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, hives, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, altered sense of taste or smell, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes). Symptoms usually last less than 2 months; a few persons are ill for as long as 6 months. Hepatitis A symptoms usually appear within 28 days (range: 15-50 days) after a person has been infected.

Get Tested—If you suspect you may have contracted hepatitis or if you are pregnant, ask your doctor to test you for the virus. The earlier you are diagnosed, the more likely you can prevent spreading the disease to others and better manage your health.