

## Viral Hepatitis

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. In the United States, viral hepatitis is usually caused by the hepatitis A, B, or C virus. Hepatitis A causes acute (short-term) infection only. Hepatitis B and C cause acute infection that can lead to chronic (long-term) infection. Chronic viral hepatitis can last a lifetime. Vaccines can prevent hepatitis A and B but not C. There are medicines to treat and sometimes cure hepatitis B and C.

### Q: How do you get viral hepatitis?

**A:** How viral hepatitis is spread depends on the type:

**Hepatitis A** is found in an infected person's stool (poop). It is usually spread through close personal contact, such as living in the same household or having sex with a person who has the virus. Contaminated food or water can lead to outbreaks of hepatitis A. Most people recover from hepatitis A with no lasting health problems.

**Hepatitis B and C** are found in infected people's blood and other body fluids, such as semen and vaginal fluid. You can get hepatitis B or C if you are exposed to an infected person's blood or body fluids, such as by sharing or accidentally getting stuck with a contaminated needle or by being born to an infected mother. Hepatitis B (but not usually C) is also often spread through unprotected sex (without a condom).

### Q: What are the symptoms of viral hepatitis?

**A:** The symptoms of viral hepatitis are similar for all types of hepatitis. They include:

- Low-grade fever (a temperature between 99.5°F and 101°F)
- Fatigue (tiredness)

- Loss of appetite
- Upset stomach
- Vomiting
- Stomach pain
- Dark urine
- Clay-colored bowel movements
- Joint pain
- Jaundice (JAWN-diss), which is when the skin and whites of the eyes turn yellow

People who are newly infected are most likely to have one or more of these symptoms, but some people with viral hepatitis do not have any symptoms. New hepatitis A infections usually cause symptoms, but as many as half the people with new hepatitis B and hepatitis C infections do not have symptoms.

Certain blood tests can show if you have hepatitis, even if you do not have symptoms. People with chronic hepatitis B or C often develop symptoms when their liver becomes damaged.

### Q: How does viral hepatitis affect women differently than men?

**A:** **Hepatitis A** affects women and men in similar ways.

**Hepatitis B** affects women differently than men:

- Women with severe liver damage may not be able to use birth control that contains estrogen. This is because a damaged liver may have problems breaking down estrogen.

- The risk of passing hepatitis B to your baby during pregnancy is high. Hepatitis B raises your risk for problems during pregnancy. Talk to your doctor about taking hepatitis B medicine to lower the risk of passing hepatitis B to your baby. Certain hepatitis B medicines are safe to take during pregnancy but are not recommended for everyone.

**Hepatitis C** also affects women and men differently:

- Research shows that acute hepatitis C goes away on its own more often for younger women than for men. Also, in women with chronic hepatitis C, liver damage usually happens more slowly than it does for men. Researchers think the hormone estrogen may help protect the liver from damage.
- You may miss menstrual periods or have shorter periods. This can happen as a side effect of

hepatitis medicines. Since hepatitis C is spread through blood, the risk of passing hepatitis C to a partner is higher during your menstrual period.

- Women with severe liver damage may not be able to use birth control that contains estrogen. This is because a damaged liver may have problems breaking down estrogen.
- Experts think the risk of passing hepatitis C to your baby during pregnancy is low. But hepatitis C raises your risk for problems during pregnancy, such as premature birth and gestational diabetes. Some hepatitis C medicines can also cause serious harm to your baby if taken during pregnancy.
- Liver damage happens more quickly for women after menopause. Hepatitis C medicines also may not work as well for women after menopause as they do for men.

## For more information...

on viral hepatitis, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**  
800-232-4636 • [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

**National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NIDDK), NIH, HHS**  
800-891-5389 • [digestive.nidk.nih.gov](http://digestive.nidk.nih.gov)

**National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), NIH, HHS**  
866-284-4107 • [www.niaid.nih.gov](http://www.niaid.nih.gov)

**Hepatitis Foundation International**  
800-891-0707 • [www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)

**The Office on Women's Health is grateful for the additional reviews by:**

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