



Care for
your liver
Think about **hepatitis**

World Hepatitis Day 2015



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

What is hepatitis?



Hepatitis is the common name for all inflammatory diseases of the liver. Liver inflammation is most often caused by one of several types of virus. These viruses differ in the ways they are transmitted and the forms of disease they cause.

Viral hepatitis infections can go unnoticed in people when they do not result in symptoms. In some patients, they can cause mild to severe illness. Symptoms of hepatitis – irrespective of the cause – include jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes), weakness, nausea, vomiting, fever and loss of appetite.

CARE FOR
YOUR LIVER

Hepatitis in the Region¹



- By the age of 15 years, 50% of children in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have been exposed to hepatitis A.
- It is estimated that every year approximately 4.3 million people are infected with hepatitis B and 800 000 people are infected with hepatitis C in the Region.
- 2% to 4% of the population across all age groups of the Region has hepatitis B.
- 1% to 4.6% of the population of the Region has hepatitis C, but in some countries this proportion can reach as high as 20% of the population.

Think about hepatitis

¹ WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, occupied Palestinian territory, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen

A

Transmitted through contaminated food and water

Key facts



- Food and water that are contaminated with faeces, and direct contact with an infectious person can transmit the virus.
- Hepatitis A infections in children are usually mild and go unnoticed. People who have the infection once and are cured develop a lifelong immunity to hepatitis A viruses.

Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E is another virus that is similar to hepatitis A in the way it is transmitted and prevented. However the hepatitis E virus is rarer and can cause severe disease, especially in pregnant women.

Who is at risk?



People who have not been vaccinated, or have not been previously infected with hepatitis A, can acquire the infection. At highest risk are those people who:

- Are living or travelling to areas where hepatitis A is widespread
- Are living in conditions with poor sanitation
- Lack access to safe water
- Inject drugs
- Live in a household with an infected person
- Are a sexual partner of someone with acute hepatitis A infection.

How to prevent it?

- Ensure that drinking water is safe.
- Ensure proper disposal of sewage within communities.
- Practise proper personal hygiene, such as washing hands regularly with safe water.

Effective vaccines against hepatitis A are available and are recommended for those at highest risk.

Hepatitis A



B

Transmitted through
contact with contaminated blood, sexual intercourse or from an infected mother to child

Key facts



- It cannot be spread through casual contact with infected persons.
- Most people do not experience any symptoms during the acute infection phase. However, it can cause acute illness with symptoms that last several weeks (see the section What is hepatitis?).
- When acquired by children, the hepatitis B virus is likely to remain in the body for the rest of their life (chronic infection). However, if acquired in adulthood, more than 90% of patients will recover and be completely rid of the virus within six months.
- In some patients with chronic hepatitis B, the infection is a major cause of long-term liver problems and cancer.
- Treatment is available for hepatitis B which slows liver damage and reduces the likelihood of cancer. However, this treatment cannot rid patients of the virus.

Who is at risk?



People who have not been vaccinated or have not been previously infected with hepatitis B can acquire the infection. At higher risk are:

- People exposed to unsafe blood or blood product transfusion, organ transplant or haemodialysis
- People who are exposed to unsafe injections in health care settings, community injection practices or unsafe tattooing, in addition to people who inject drugs
- Infants born to infected mothers
- Sex partners of infected persons or persons having unprotected sex with multiple partners with unknown infection status
- Men who have sex with men
- Health care workers.

How to prevent it?

- Ensure early vaccination of children and vaccination of adults at higher risk.
- Ensure the safety of blood and blood products for transfusion as well as organs for transplantation.
- Avoid unnecessary as well as unsafe injections.
- Avoid unprotected sex with persons of unknown infections status: always use condoms.

Hepatitis B





Transmitted through
unsafe injections, inadequate sterilization of medical equipment in some health care settings, and unscreened blood and blood products

Key facts



- It is not spread through casual contact with infected persons.
- It can also be transmitted sexually, particularly among people who are co-infected with HIV, and can be passed from an infected mother to her baby. However these modes of transmission are less common.
- When infected, some patients can spontaneously clear the virus without treatment. In others the infection can lead to permanent liver damage or cancer.
- No vaccine is available; however, there exists an effective treatment that in many cases can cure the disease. Unfortunately, access to diagnosis and treatment is very limited in many countries.

Who is at risk?



- People exposed to unsafe blood or blood product transfusion, organ transplant or haemodialysis.
- People who are exposed to unsafe injections in health care settings, unsafe community injection practices or unsafe tattooing, in addition to people who inject drugs.
- Infants born to infected mothers.
- Sex partners of infected persons or persons having unprotected sex with multiple partners with unknown infection status.
- Health care workers.

Hepatitis C

How to prevent it?

- Ensure the safety of blood and blood products for transfusion and of organs for transplantation.
- Avoid unnecessary as well as unsafe injections.
- Ensure proper handling and disposal of sharps and medical waste in health care settings.
- Do not share injection or tattooing equipment.
- Avoid unprotected sex with persons of unknown infections status: always use condoms.



Living with chronic hepatitis

People who have chronic hepatitis B or C may spend years without exhibiting any symptoms, and many people never develop symptoms at all.

In some people, the virus may slowly damage the liver or even cause liver cancer. For those people, existing treatments can slow the damage to the liver and prevent the development of hepatic cancer in the case of hepatitis B, and can completely cure hepatitis C.

It is therefore important to diagnose hepatitis early, to adopt lifestyle measures that help prevent damage to the liver and to take treatment when necessary. **The only way to know if you have hepatitis B or C is with a blood test.**

If you are diagnosed with hepatitis

- Arrange regular contact with your doctor to monitor the state of your liver. Not every person with hepatitis requires treatment. But close monitoring of the liver allows for treatment at the right time: before damage occurs.
- Avoid exposure to hepatitis types other than the ones you have. Co-infection with more than one type of hepatitis increases the risk of liver damage or cancer. Consider vaccination, if available, and take appropriate measures to prevent getting infected with another type.
- Take your treatment exactly as prescribed, regularly and on time if you are prescribed treatment. Adherence to treatment is the best way to maximum its benefit.
- Avoid alcohol. Excessive alcohol can damage the liver. In the presence of hepatitis, it can accelerate liver cirrhosis.
- Avoid taking any medicines without consulting with your doctor, including the over-the-counter and herbal medicines. Some medicines can have negative effects on the liver.
- If you are pregnant and infected with the B virus, ensure your baby is vaccinated at birth and receives the appropriate follow-up doses.
- Keep yourself fit and healthy. Follow a balanced diet, exercise and avoid smoking.

Check whether you are at risk of viral hepatitis

- You live in an area where drinking water could be contaminated with sewage or faeces.
- You consume food prepared or handled in unhygienic conditions.
- You have family, household members or sexual partners who have been infected with hepatitis B.
- Your mother had hepatitis B when or before she gave birth to you.
- You are a health care worker or work in a prison.
- You have received injections of medicine by unauthorized community members.
- You are a recipient of repeated blood transfusions.
- You are the recipient of an organ transplant.
- You are undergoing dialysis treatment.
- You have shared sharps such as tattoo needles, razors or others with people you know or you do not know whether they have hepatitis.
- You frequently change sexual partners or have unprotected sex with strangers.
- You are currently injecting or have previously injected drugs.
- You are a man who has sex with other men.
- You have undergone a blood test for liver functions and the results are elevated.
- You have yellowing of your skin or your eyes.
- You have liver cirrhosis or fibrosis.
- You have hepatic cancer (cancer of the liver).
- You are living with HIV.



These are risk factors for or signs of a possible viral hepatitis infection. If you feel you are at risk of viral hepatitis, arrange for a doctor visit and discuss the need for hepatitis testing.