

VIRAL HEPATITIS

Information for Gay/Bisexual Men



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 injection drug equipment puts a person at risk for both HIV and Hepatitis C. Of people with HIV infection, 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.

What is hepatitis?

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be affected. Heavy alcohol use, toxins, some medications, and certain medical conditions can cause hepatitis.

Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. These are three different, contagious liver diseases caused by three unrelated viruses. Although all three types of hepatitis can cause similar symptoms, they have different modes of transmission.

Acute and chronic viral hepatitis

Hepatitis A appears only as an “acute,” or newly occurring infection, and usually lasts no more than 6 months. Although Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C can also begin as acute infections, each can 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.

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

How is 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 is why travelers to certain countries are at risk.
- **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 injection drug equipment.
- **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 through sexual contact, although scientists do not know how frequently this occurs. Having a sexually transmitted disease or HIV, sex with multiple partners, or rough sex appears to increase a person’s risk for Hepatitis C.





Should I 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. Booster doses are not currently recommended.

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 I be tested?

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

Testing is recommended for Hepatitis B. If at all possible, gay and bisexual men should be tested for Hepatitis B at the same time they get their first dose of vaccine. If tests indicate that a man has never been infected, then vaccination will protect him. If tests show that he has recovered from a past infection, he is now immune, and the vaccine offers no added benefit. If tests indicate he is chronically infected, the vaccine offers no protection, and he should get a thorough medical evaluation. Since people infected with Hepatitis B are capable of spreading the virus to others, their sexual partners should also be tested.

Testing for Hepatitis C is not recommended unless a person is engaging in risky behaviors or has HIV infection.

Is viral hepatitis common?

Yes. Each year, about 70,000 Americans become infected with one type of acute viral hepatitis. In addition, an estimated 1.2 million people have chronic Hepatitis B, and 3.2 million people have chronic Hepatitis C. Of those living with chronic hepatitis, many do not know they are infected.

What are the symptoms of viral hepatitis?

Many people with viral hepatitis do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. Even though a person has no symptoms, the virus can still be detected in the blood.

Symptoms, if they do appear, are similar for all types of hepatitis. If symptoms occur with acute viral hepatitis, they usually appear within several weeks to several months of exposure and can last up to 6 months. Symptoms of chronic viral hepatitis can take up to 30 years to develop. Damage to the liver can silently occur during this time. When symptoms do appear, 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 diagnosed and treated?

Doctors diagnose hepatitis using one or more blood tests, depending on the type of hepatitis. For people with acute viral hepatitis, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and in certain situations, antiviral medication. In some cases, people with acute viral hepatitis are hospitalized. People who have acute hepatitis typically feel sick for a few months before they recover.

People with chronic viral hepatitis should seek the advice of a doctor experienced in treating Hepatitis B or Hepatitis C and should be monitored on a regular basis. Some may also benefit from antiviral medication. Several treatments are available that can significantly improve health and delay or reverse the effects of liver disease.

For more information

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



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Division of Viral Hepatitis



www.cdc.gov/hepatitis