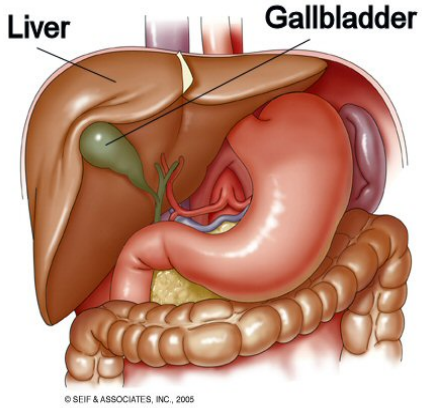
Hepatitis, Viral: A Through E and Beyond

Hepatitis (inflammation of the liver) can be caused by many different things, including several different viruses. These viruses are named hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E. All can cause acute or short-term viral hepatitis. The hepatitis B, C, and D viruses can also cause chronic hepatitis. Chronic hepatitis infection is prolonged and sometimes lifelong. Other viruses may also cause hepatitis but they have yet to be discovered.



SYMPTOMS OF VIRAL HEPATITIS

- Fatigue.
- Abdominal pain.
- Loss of appetite.
- Nausea.
- Vomiting.
- Diarrhea.
- Low grade fever.
- Headache.
- Yellowing of the skin (*jaundice*).
- Some people have no symptoms.

HEPATITIS A

Disease Spread

Primarily through food or water contaminated by feces from an infected person. Rarely, it spreads through contact with infected blood.

People at Risk

- International travelers.
- People living in areas where hepatitis A outbreaks are common.
- People who live with or have sex with an infected person.

During outbreaks

- Day care children and employees.
- Men who have sex with men.
- Injection drug users.

Prevention

- Receive the hepatitis A vaccine.
- Avoid tap water, ice cubes made from tap water, and uncooked or inadequately cooked foods when traveling internationally to areas with poor or questionable sanitation.
- Practicing good hygiene and sanitation.

Treatment

Hepatitis A usually resolves on its own over several weeks.

HEPATITIS B

Disease Spread

- Through contact with infected blood.
- Through sex with an infected person.
- From mother to child during childbirth.

People at Risk

- People who have sex with an infected person.
- Men who have sex with men.
- Injection drug users.
- Children of immigrants from disease-endemic areas.
- Infants born to infected mothers.
- People who live with an infected person.
- Health care workers exposed to blood.
- Hemodialysis patients.
- People who received a transfusion of blood or blood products before July 1992 or clotting factors made before 1987.

Prevention

Receive the hepatitis B vaccine.

Treatment

For chronic hepatitis B: drug treatment with alpha interferon, peginterferon, lamivudine, entecavir, telbivudine, tenofovir or adefovir dipivoxil.

Acute hepatitis B usually resolves on its own. Very severe cases can be treated with lamivudine.

HEPATITIS C

Disease Spread

Primarily through contact with infected blood. Less often through sexual contact and childbirth.

People at Risk

- Injection drug users.
- People who have sex with an infected person.
- People who have multiple sex partners.
- Health care workers exposed to blood.
- Infants born to infected women.
- Hemodialysis patients.
- People who received a transfusion of blood or blood products before July 1992 or clotting factors made before 1987.

Prevention

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. The only way to prevent the disease is to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus. This means avoiding behaviors like sharing drug needles or sharing personal items like toothbrushes, razors, and nail clippers with an infected person.

Treatment

Chronic hepatitis C. Drug treatment with peginterferon alone or combination treatment with peginterferon and the drug ribavirin. Additional drug therapies are being investigated.

Acute hepatitis C. Treatment is recommended if it does not resolve within 2 to 3 months.

HEPATITIS D

Disease Spread

Through contact with infected blood. This disease happens only in people who are already or also infected with hepatitis B.

People at Risk

Anyone infected with hepatitis B: Injection drug users who have hepatitis B have the highest risk. People who have hepatitis B are also at risk if they have sex with a person infected with hepatitis D or if they live with an infected person. Also at risk are people who received a transfusion of blood or blood products before July 1992 or clotting factors made before 1987.

Prevention

Immunization against hepatitis B for those not already infected. Also, avoid exposure to:

- Infected blood.
- Contaminated needles.
- An infected person's personal items (toothbrush, razor, nail clippers).

Treatment

Chronic hepatitis D. Drug treatment with alpha interferon.

HEPATITIS E

Disease Spread

Through food or water contaminated by feces from an infected person. This disease is common in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast and Central Asia but very uncommon in the U. S.

People at Risk

- International travelers.
- People living in areas where hepatitis E outbreaks are common.
- People who live with an infected person.

Prevention

There is no vaccine for hepatitis E. The only way to prevent the disease is to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus. This means avoiding tap water ice cubes made from tap water, and uncooked or inadequately cooked foods when traveling internationally to hepatitis E endemic areas with poor or questionable sanitation.

Treatment

Hepatitis E usually resolves on its own over several weeks to months.

OTHER CAUSES OF VIRAL HEPATITIS

Some cases of viral hepatitis cannot be attributed to the hepatitis A, B, C, D, or E viruses. This is called non A-E hepatitis. Scientists continue to study the causes of non A-E hepatitis.

HOPE THROUGH RESEARCH

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, through its Division of Digestive Diseases and Nutrition, supports basic and clinical research into the nature and transmission of the hepatitis viruses, and the activation and mechanisms of the immune system. Results from these studies are used in developing new treatments and methods of prevention.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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