

For Teens: Understanding Hepatitis

Hepatitis is a disease that harms the liver through inflammation. It can be caused by fat in the liver, alcohol, drugs, herbs, medicines, toxins, obesity, or immune or genetic conditions. It can also be caused by a virus.

There are 5 types of viral hepatitis. The most common in the U.S. are hepatitis A, B, and C. Hepatitis A spreads through sexual contact or contaminated food or water. Types B and C spread through bodily fluids, sex, or infected needles. Hepatitis D only occurs in people with Hepatitis B. Hepatitis E is particularly dangerous if you are pregnant.

Viral hepatitis can be treated. But the virus often stays in the body. Hepatitis B can be controlled but rarely cured. Hepatitis C can often be cured. Hepatitis A is usually acute (short-term). This means you will likely get better without treatment after a few weeks. In some cases, hepatitis can lead to severe liver damage and even death.

A vaccine can help prevent hepatitis A and B. If you're at risk, ask your healthcare provider about it. There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.



What to look for

Hepatitis may show symptoms soon after your liver gets inflamed, such as with hepatitis A. However, some types may not show symptoms for months or even years after the start of the disease. But over time, liver damage may cause serious health problems.

Early stage symptoms can include:

- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Muscle aches
- Fever
- Dark yellow urine

- Gray or clay-colored stools
- Diarrhea

Later stage symptoms are:

- Yellow skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Swollen legs and belly
- Dark yellow urine
- Internal bleeding

Treatment

Hepatitis A can be treated with rest and support care until it goes away. It's not chronic (long-term).

Types B and C often become chronic. You will be referred to a special healthcare provider. They can help you learn more about the disease and how to manage it. You will also have checkups to make sure your liver is still working the right way. Hepatitis C can be cured with oral medicines, usually taken for 8 or 12 weeks.

If you have a nonviral type of hepatitis, see a specialist to help manage and treat your disease. Don't drink alcohol. Try to maintain a healthy weight, exercise, and manage any other conditions like diabetes. This is important no matter what type of hepatitis you have. A condition called nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH) is becoming a common cause of hepatitis, even in adolescents.

If you don't get treated

Hepatitis B and C can stay in the body and keep damaging the liver. They also raise your risk of liver cancer. After many years, a liver transplant may be needed. Drinking alcohol and being overweight can worsen the disease. So don't drink alcohol and stay at a healthy weight.

How to prevent hepatitis

Never share piercing, tattoo, or drug needles or paraphernalia. Hepatitis B and C can spread through infected needles. Never have unprotected sex. If you think you may have been exposed to hepatitis B or C, get tested for HIV.