

# Protecting Your Family from Viral Hepatitis Infection



Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. It's often caused by a virus. Hepatitis can be brief (acute). Or it can be long-lasting (chronic). The effects of hepatitis can be worse for someone who has another liver disease. You can take steps to protect your family from viral hepatitis.

## Types of viral hepatitis

There are several types (strains) of viral hepatitis. The most common are:

- **Hepatitis A virus (HAV).** This virus spreads through contaminated food or water. It can also spread from person to person. Hepatitis A spreads with poor hand hygiene and is often passed along in daycare, restaurants, and places with poor toilet or sewage facilities. It usually causes a mild illness in children with symptoms like the flu. In rare cases, it can cause a serious infection that leads to liver failure.
- **Hepatitis B virus (HBV).** This virus spreads through blood and bodily fluids. A baby can get it when the birth parent passes on the virus during childbirth. The virus can also be passed through contact with infected blood, such as by touching an open cut or scrape. HBV can also spread if you use an item that has even a tiny amount of an infected person's blood on it. This includes personal items such as toothbrushes, nail clippers, razors, or pierced earrings. It also includes eating utensils. And it can be spread through tattoo needles or drug needles. Unprotected sex is another way of passing the virus. Hepatitis B often goes away after a flu-like illness. But it can turn into a chronic problem that never goes away, especially in younger children. Chronic hepatitis B can cause liver scarring (cirrhosis) over many years.
- **Hepatitis C virus (HCV).** This virus also spreads through blood. It can also pass from birth parent to child during childbirth. Like hepatitis B, the virus can be passed by contact with infected blood or having unprotected sex. In many cases, hepatitis C develops into a chronic illness and causes cirrhosis years or decades later.

## Getting your family vaccinated



The best way to protect your family from hepatitis A and B is with vaccines. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C at this time. Vaccines help the body protect itself against infection. Any child with liver disease should be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B. And it's a good idea for adults to get hepatitis A and B vaccines. Here's what you need to know about hepatitis A and B vaccines:

- **Hepatitis A** vaccine is given to children starting at age 1. In children up to age 18 years, the vaccine is done with 2 shots. Each shot is given 6 months apart. Adults age 18 and older may get a combined hepatitis A-B vaccine that is given in 3 doses over 6 months.
- **Hepatitis B** vaccine is often given soon after a child's birth. It's required before a child starts school. Hepatitis B vaccine is done with 3 shots a few months apart. If a pregnant person is infected, a medicine called hepatitis B immune globulin is also given to the baby within the first 12 hours after delivery. Sometimes the birth parent is given a hepatitis B antiviral medicine during pregnancy to decrease the risk of transmission to the baby. Speak with your healthcare provider about whether this is right for you.

## Tips for preventing hepatitis infection

Viral hepatitis spreads through contact with infected stool or blood. These tips will help you protect your family:

- **Wash hands.** Adults and children should wash hands often, and always after using the bathroom or changing diapers and before preparing food and eating. To wash your hands or your child's hands, work up a good lather with soap and clean, running water. Scrub for at least 10 to 15 seconds, then rinse.
- **Take care with laundry.** Wash sheets, towels, clothing, or other items soiled with blood or stool separately from other laundry. Use hot water.
- **Clean household surfaces.** Use a bleach and water solution to clean surfaces that may have contact with infected blood or stool. Use 1/4 cup of bleach in 1 gallon of water.
- **Be careful about sharing.** Make sure your child knows that sharing certain items with others can be risky. These items include toothbrushes, eating utensils, nail clippers, razors, and pierced earrings. Also be sure your teen knows that drug and tattoo needles can carry the hepatitis virus. Teach your teen about the risks of unprotected sex.
- **Be careful when you travel.** In countries with poor sanitation, the water supply and unwashed fruits and vegetables can carry hepatitis A. Before you travel, find out if the area has a risk of hepatitis A. If you are in a high-risk area, don't eat raw fruits or vegetables, and drink only bottled water.

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