

Hepatitis

Hepatitis is the term used to describe inflammation of the liver.

It's usually the result of a viral infection or liver damage caused by drinking alcohol. But it can also be caused by other infectious and non-infectious illnesses.

There are different types of hepatitis.

Some types will pass without any serious problems. But others can be long-lasting (chronic). They can cause scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), loss of liver function and, in some cases, liver cancer.

There has been a small increase in the number of cases of hepatitis in children. Experts are looking into what could be causing this.

Good hygiene and [cleaning your hands](#) can help to prevent infections that can cause hepatitis. It's important to show children how to clean their hands properly.

Symptoms of hepatitis

Short-term (acute) hepatitis often has no noticeable symptoms, so you may not realise you have it.

If symptoms do develop, they can include:

- muscle and joint pain
- a high temperature
- [feeling and being sick](#)
- feeling unusually tired all the time
- a general sense of feeling unwell
- loss of appetite
- [tummy pain](#)
- dark urine
- pale, grey-coloured poo
- [itchy skin](#)
- yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice)

Contact your GP if:

- you have any persistent or troublesome symptoms that you think could be caused by hepatitis
- your child develops any symptoms of hepatitis, such as yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice)

Long-term (chronic) hepatitis also may not have any obvious symptoms until the liver stops working (liver failure). Routine [blood tests](#) can help diagnose hepatitis.

In the later stages it can cause:

- jaundice
- swelling in the legs, ankles and feet
- confusion
- blood in your poo or vomit

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus. You can get hepatitis A if you eat or drink something contaminated with the poo of an infected person. It's most common in countries where sanitation is poor.

Hepatitis A usually passes within a few months. But it can sometimes be severe and even life threatening.

There's no specific treatment for it, other than to relieve symptoms like pain, nausea and itching.

Vaccination against hepatitis A is recommended if you:

- are at high risk of infection or severe consequences of infection
- travel to an area where the virus is common - for example, Africa, South America or the Far East

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is caused by the hepatitis B virus. It is spread in the blood of an infected person.

It's a common infection worldwide. It is usually spread from infected pregnant women to their babies, or from child-to-child contact.

In rare cases, it can be spread through unprotected sex and injecting drugs.

Hepatitis B is uncommon in Ireland. Most cases are in people who got infected in another country.

Most adults infected with hepatitis B are able to fight off the virus. They usually recover from the infection within a couple of months.

But most people infected as children develop a long-term infection. This is chronic hepatitis B. It can lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer. Antiviral medication can be used to treat it.

Vaccination against hepatitis B is recommended for people in high-risk groups, such as:

- healthcare workers
- people who inject drugs
- men who have sex with men
- children born to mothers with hepatitis B
- people travelling to parts of the world where the infection is more common

The hepatitis B vaccine is part of the [routine immunisation programme](#) for children.

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus and is the most common type of viral hepatitis in Ireland.

It's usually spread through blood-to-blood contact with an infected person.

In Ireland, it's most commonly spread through sharing needles used to inject drugs.

Poor healthcare practices and unsafe medical injections are the main way it's spread outside Ireland.

Hepatitis C often causes no noticeable symptoms or only flu-like symptoms, so many people are unaware they're infected.

Around 1 in 4 people will fight off the infection and be free of the virus. In the remaining cases, the infection stays in the body for many years.

This is known as chronic hepatitis C and can cause cirrhosis and liver failure.

Chronic hepatitis C can be treated with very effective antiviral medicines. But there's currently no vaccine available.

Find out more about [hepatitis C](#).

Hepatitis D

Hepatitis D is caused by the hepatitis D virus. It only affects people who are already infected with hepatitis B. This is because it needs the hepatitis B virus to survive in the body.

Hepatitis D is usually spread through blood-to-blood contact or sexual contact. It's uncommon in Ireland. It is more common in other parts of Europe, the Middle East, Africa and South America.

Long-term infection with hepatitis D and hepatitis B can increase your risk of developing serious problems, such as cirrhosis and liver cancer.

There's no vaccine specifically for hepatitis D, but the hepatitis B vaccine can help protect you from it.

Hepatitis E

Hepatitis E is caused by the hepatitis E virus. The number of cases in Europe has increased in recent

years and it's now the most common cause of short-term (acute) hepatitis in Ireland.

The virus has been mainly linked with eating raw or undercooked:

- pork meat or offal
- wild boar meat
- venison
- shellfish

Hepatitis E is generally a mild and short-term infection that does not need any treatment. But it can be serious in some people, such as those who have a weakened immune system.

There's no vaccine for hepatitis E. Epidemic hepatitis E may be common in parts of the world with poor sanitation. You can reduce your risk when travelling to these places by practising good food and water hygiene measures.

Alcoholic hepatitis

Alcoholic hepatitis is a type of hepatitis caused by drinking excessive amounts of alcohol over many years.

The condition is common in Ireland and many people do not realise they have it.

This is because it does not usually cause any symptoms. But it can cause sudden jaundice and liver failure in some people.

Stopping drinking will usually allow your liver to recover. But there's a risk you could eventually develop cirrhosis, liver failure or liver cancer if you continue to drink too much alcohol.

You can reduce your risk of developing alcoholic hepatitis by controlling how much you drink.

The recommended [weekly low-risk alcohol guidelines](#) are less than:

- 11 standard drinks for women
- 17 standard drinks for men

[How alcohol can affect your liver](#)

Autoimmune hepatitis

Autoimmune hepatitis is a rare cause of long-term hepatitis in which the immune system attacks and damages the liver.

Eventually, the liver can become so damaged that it stops working properly.

Treatment for autoimmune hepatitis involves very effective medicines. These suppress the immune system and reduce inflammation.

It's not clear what causes autoimmune hepatitis and it's not known if anything can be done to prevent it.

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