



The American College of  
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS  
FAQ125  
WOMEN'S HEALTH

## Protecting Yourself Against Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C

- **What is hepatitis?**
- **What are hepatitis B and hepatitis C?**
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- **Glossary**

### What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is an infection that affects the liver.

### What are hepatitis B and hepatitis C?

Hepatitis B is an infection caused by the hepatitis B virus. Hepatitis C is an infection caused by the hepatitis C virus. Both diseases are contagious and can lead to serious, long-term illness.

### What is acute hepatitis?

Acute infection is a short-term illness that happens in the first 6 months after a person is infected with the hepatitis B virus or the hepatitis C virus. Acute infection may cause only mild symptoms or no symptoms at all. When symptoms do occur, they may include the following:

- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Stomach pain
- Pain in the muscles and joints

## What is chronic hepatitis?

Chronic infection can occur if the virus stays in the body. Chronic infection with both viruses can cause serious, long-term liver disease, such as **cirrhosis**. In this condition, **cells** of the liver die and are replaced by scar tissue. Over time, the liver stops working. In some cases, chronic hepatitis infection can lead to liver cancer.

## What is a carrier?

A **carrier** is a person who is not able to get rid of the hepatitis B or hepatitis C virus. Carriers keep the virus for the rest of their lives and can give it to others.

A small number of adults and many children younger than 5 years infected with the hepatitis B virus will become carriers. Most hepatitis B carriers do not have symptoms. A few will develop serious liver disease that can lead to early death. Most adults infected with the hepatitis C virus—about 75–85%—become carriers. About two thirds of hepatitis C carriers eventually develop chronic liver disease.

## How is the hepatitis B virus spread?

The hepatitis B virus is spread by direct contact with the body fluids (blood, semen, or vaginal fluids) of an infected person. This can happen during unprotected sex or while sharing needles used to inject (“shoot”) drugs. A baby can be infected during birth if the mother has the hepatitis B virus. The hepatitis B virus also can be spread if you live with an infected person and share household items that may come in contact with body fluids, such as toothbrushes or razors. The hepatitis B virus is not spread by casual contact with people and objects. Casual contact includes shaking hands, sharing food or drink, or coughing and sneezing. Also, the hepatitis B virus is not spread by breastfeeding.

## Is there a test for the hepatitis B virus?

There are different blood tests for the hepatitis B virus. The tests look for **antibodies** to the virus. Tests for the hepatitis B virus can tell whether you have been recently infected or whether you are a carrier. They also can show whether you have had the hepatitis B virus in the past and are now immune to it or whether you have had the hepatitis B vaccine.

## Who should be tested for the hepatitis B virus?

It is recommended that the following people be tested for the hepatitis B virus:

- Pregnant women
- Infants born to infected mothers
- Sex partners of and those who live with an infected person
- People with **human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)** infection
- Users of injected illegal drugs
- Men who have sex with men
- People who are the source of blood or other body fluid exposures (for example, when a health care worker has been stuck by a needle)
- People born in countries with a high rate of hepatitis B virus infection
- People receiving cancer treatment or treatment with drugs that suppress the immune system

## What treatment is available for hepatitis B virus infection?

There is no cure for hepatitis B virus infection, but symptoms can be managed. Treatment can be given for some of the liver diseases caused by the infection.

## How can hepatitis B virus infection be prevented?

The best protection against the hepatitis B virus is a vaccine. The vaccine triggers your body's immune system to fight off the virus when you are exposed to it. It usually is given in three or four doses.

## What if I have been recently exposed to the hepatitis B virus and I have not had the vaccine?

People who have been recently exposed to the hepatitis B virus and are not vaccinated are usually given the vaccine along with a shot of **hepatitis B immune globulin (HBIG)**. HBIG contains antibodies to the virus. It can give additional protection against infection in certain situations.

## How is the hepatitis C virus spread?

The hepatitis C virus is spread by direct contact with infected blood. This can happen while sharing needles or sharing household items that come into contact with blood. A baby can be infected during birth if the mother has the hepatitis C virus. It also can be spread during unprotected sex, but it is harder to spread the virus this way. It is not spread by casual contact.

## Is there a test for the hepatitis C virus?

There are several tests for the hepatitis C virus. One test shows whether you are infected with the hepatitis C virus. If the test result is positive, another kind of test can tell whether you still have the virus in your blood and if so, how much virus is present.

## Who should be tested for the hepatitis C virus?

Those at high risk of infection should be tested for the hepatitis C virus. People at high risk of hepatitis C virus infection include the following:

- Users of injected illegal drugs
- People who received clotting factors before 1987
- Dialysis patients
- People with HIV
- People who have abnormal liver enzyme test results
- People who received blood or who had an organ transplant before 1992
- People who received blood from someone who later tested positive for the hepatitis C virus
- Health care workers who may have been exposed to hepatitis C-positive blood (for example, who have been stuck with a needle used on a person with hepatitis C)

## What treatment is available for hepatitis C virus infection?

A combination of antiviral drugs is used to treat hepatitis C virus infection. This treatment does not work for everyone. Treatment success depends in part on the strain of the hepatitis C virus you are infected with.

## How can hepatitis C virus infection be prevented?

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C virus infection. You can help prevent infection with the hepatitis C virus by avoiding risky behavior that can pass on the virus:

- Use a latex condom during sex.
- Know your partner's sexual history and have only one sexual partner.
- If you are injecting drugs, get help and try to stop—if you cannot stop, do not share needles.

## Glossary

**Antibodies:** Proteins in the blood produced in reaction to foreign substances, such as bacteria and viruses that cause infection.

**Carrier:** A person who is infected with the organism of a disease without showing symptoms and who can transmit the disease to another person.

**Cells:** The smallest units of a structure in the body; the building blocks for all parts of the body.

**Cirrhosis:** A disease caused by loss of liver cells, which are replaced by scar tissue that impairs liver function.

**Hepatitis B Immune Globulin (HBIG):** A substance given to provide temporary protection against infection with the hepatitis B virus.

**Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV):** A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system and causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

## If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

**FAQ125:** Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to the institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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