

Viral hepatitis

1) Myth: "A person's spit came in contact with my eye. Can I get infected?"

Low risk. While saliva is not as infectious as blood, transmission of HIV or other diseases can occur via this route. Getting tested would be the safe way to go.

2) Myth: If you are infected, you need to go to the traditional healer and he/she can "cut your jaundice" and you will get better

Traditional healers may have a psychological effect on people. Even if the person gets cured of jaundice through herbal medication, it doesn't rule out hepatitis, and one should still go to the specialist to get tested.

3) Myth: People get infected with hepatitis as they have 'sinned'.

No. Hepatitis is not linked to any moral/ cultural belief associated with sin. Hepatitis refers to inflammation of the liver, which may result from various causes, both infectious (i.e., viral, bacterial, fungal, and parasitic organisms) and non-infectious (e.g., alcohol, drugs, autoimmune diseases, and metabolic diseases).

4) Myth: People living with Hepatitis cannot continue having sex

Transmission of hepatitis B via sexual contact can be easily prevented by vaccination or use of barrier type contraception. Transmission of hepatitis C via sexual contact is unusual, however the likelihood increases if there is coinfection with HIV.

5) Myth: Hepatitis is a genetic/hereditary disease, which is passed on from parent to child.

Hepatitis is not a genetic disease and is not inherited. Hepatitis B is often transmitted from mother to child during the birthing process. Transmission from the mother can be prevented if her HBV status is known and immunoglobulin is administered within 12 hours of birth.

6) Myth: Hepatitis B is an advanced liver disease caused by hepatitis A infection; and hepatitis B will develop and further advance to hepatitis C infection.

Hepatitis A, B, and C are diseases caused by three different and distinct viruses. Although each can cause similar symptoms, they have different modes of transmission and distinct clinical manifestation. There is no progression from one form of infection to another, although coinfection can occur, hepatitis C infected patients are recommended to be vaccinated for hepatitis A & B.

7) Myth: You can tell when someone has Hepatitis B/C

Most people living with hepatitis B/C do not have symptoms in the early stages, so they are often unaware that they have the disease. There is no way that you can diagnose viral hepatitis by looking at a person. Associated symptoms such as jaundice can be caused by any number of health conditions.

Hepatitis A

1) Myth: “If I got hepatitis A, I am immune to the other forms of hepatitis”

Hepatitis A is a short-term infection of which most people recover completely within weeks. People who have had hepatitis A get lifelong protection against hepatitis A ONLY – this means they cannot contract the hepatitis A virus again. However, they can be at risk of infection with other forms of hepatitis such as B or C. For hepatitis B, there is a vaccine available. A vaccine is also available for hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B

1) Myth: There is no treatment available for chronic hepatitis B.

The disease is not curable, but it is manageable. Chronic HBV can be treated with a number of effective medications that can suppress, slow or reverse the liver disease. All chronically infected patients require life-long monitoring.

2) Myth: “I was told I am a ‘healthy carrier’ for hepatitis B so I don’t need to worry”.

The term healthy carrier is misleading and should not be used. In the past, the term healthy carrier was used to refer to people living with chronic hepatitis B that had no symptoms. This can be confusing as it gives people a false sense of security and deters them from seeking treatment, putting them at risk of serious liver disease and liver cancer.

People living with hepatitis B might look healthy, but they still live with the virus and therefore they should visit a liver specialist every 6-12 months for check-ups.

Inactive carriers can progress to cirrhosis or liver cancer at any time. Continued screening should take place at regular intervals throughout the patient’s lifetime.

3) Myth: Hepatitis B can be transmitted through casual contact such as kissing, handshakes or sharing of meals, water, bowls or utensils with someone who has the disease.

Truth: The disease can only be contracted on an intimate basis, such as sharing bodily fluids through unprotected sex or contact with blood. HBV can also be transmitted from an infected mother to her child at birth.

HBV is transmitted through activities that involve percutaneous (i.e., puncture through the skin) or mucosal contact with infectious blood or body fluids.

4) Myth: Hepatitis B vaccine prevents liver cancer and enhances healing in infected patients.

The vaccine prevents infection, which can lead to cancer. Viral hepatitis is one of many factors that can contribute to the development of liver cancer.

5) Myth: Patients from countries with high HBV prevalence can wait until age 40 before getting screened.

Truth: Any person from a high-prevalence region of the world, including the Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, India and Africa, should be screened and vaccinated, regardless of age.

6) Myth: “Can I breastfeed even though I have Hep B?”

Yes, it is safe to breastfeed. Hepatitis B cannot be transmitted to the baby through breast milk. Vaccination of the new-born will reduce any risk of any mother to child transmission.

7) Myth: If you are vaccinated, you can still get infected with hepatitis B.

In some cases, immunity may wear off over time. If you have been vaccinated and are at risk of exposure to the virus, it may be worthwhile to have a blood test to determine if a booster shot is required.

8) Myth: “If I am infected by the hepatitis B virus can I still be vaccinated to prevent me from contracting or spreading it?”

No, vaccination is not necessary, but your household contacts or partners should be vaccinated.

9) Myth: “I got hepatitis B. I was told I can’t get married or have kids.”

There is no reason why you could not get married or have a family, though it is strongly recommended that those close to you are vaccinated.

10) Myth: “Can my kids get hepatitis B even though they have been vaccinated for it?”

After the complete series of vaccines has been given, the chances of getting hepatitis B are very low. No vaccine is %100 effective; a simple blood test will determine the immunity status

11) Myth: Hepatitis B can be transmitted by mosquito bites:

Hepatitis B cannot be transmitted by any insect bites, including mosquitos. Mosquitoes transmit diseases such as yellow fever and malaria. Mosquitoes and other insects are not efficient vectors for viral hepatitis. There are no known cases worldwide of transmission by mosquito.

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Hepatitis C

1) Myth: Hepatitis C will go away without treatment

About 75% of people who are exposed to hepatitis C will develop a chronic infection. A percentage will clear the virus without treatment. For everyone else, though, hepatitis C turns into a chronic, or long-term, disease. And over time, untreated hepatitis C can lead to health problems like cirrhosis, cancer, and liver failure.

2) Myth: Hepatitis C is rare.

False. An estimated 170 million people worldwide and over 230,000 Australians and particularly in Victoria, 60,000 people are living with chronic hepatitis C.

3) Myth: Hepatitis C Can Be Spread Through Coughing, Kissing, or Shaking Hands

No. Casual contact with someone who has hepatitis C will not expose you to infection. It is recommended that you not share toothbrushes or shaving equipment, as there is a remote possibility of blood from these objects causing transmission.

4) Myth: Hepatitis C can affect only the liver

Though it primarily attacks the liver, hepatitis C can also have effects on other parts of the body (brain, blood vessels, pancreas, and kidneys). This is normally when the disease is more progressed.

5) Myth: Teenagers are most likely to have Hep C

Approximately 60% of new infections are in people aged 15 – 29 years of age. It is important that young people understand the risk factors and transmission pathways of hepatitis.

6) Myth: There's a vaccine for Hepatitis C

Although vaccines are available to prevent the spread of hepatitis A and B, there isn't one developed yet for hepatitis C. If you are living with hepatitis C, experts recommend that you get tested and vaccinated for hepatitis A and B.

7) Myth: "I have fever and always feel tired. Do I have hepatitis C?"

No, There are many health conditions that could cause these symptoms, however if you suspect you may be at risk of hepatitis, consult a doctor.

8) Myth: "You should disclose your HCV status to everyone"

It is not incumbent on you to disclose your HCV status, except in rare circumstances (joining armed forces, performing exposure prone procedures, taking health insurance, donating blood, and in some forms of martial arts).

9) Myth: A diagnosis of HCV is akin to a death sentence

No, a cure for hepatitis C is readily available, and clinical trials show that in many cases the liver can repair itself once the virus is eliminated.

10) Myth: HCV takes a long time before it starts to damage your liver

In some HCV positive people, deterioration can be quite rapid. This of course is not the norm, but can happen. Liver damage can be exacerbated by lifestyle choices such as consuming excessive alcohol or having a high fat diet or little exercise.

11) Myth: Everyone who has a tattoo or a piercing ends up getting infected with hepatitis C

Your chances of having problems at a licensed, commercial facility are slim. But tattoos or piercings done with nonsterile instruments can spread hepatitis C.

If you get a tattoo or piercing, look for a facility that has all single-use items like gloves, needles, and ink pots.

12) Myth: Once you've been treated for Hep C, you can't get it again.

Even after successful treatment to cure hepatitis C, you can still be infected again. Ongoing risk factors such as injecting drug use or non-sterile tattooing can result in reinfection.

13) Myth: Hepatitis C is a sexually transmitted disease

Fact: HCV is transmitted by blood-to-blood exposure. However, like many myths, this one is grounded in some truth. Hepatitis C can be transmitted sexually, but the risk is very low. It is difficult to study sexual transmission of HCV, but the majority of studies conducted to date have shown a 0-3% chance of contracting HCV through unprotected sex in stable monogamous heterosexual relationships. Transmission is more likely when blood is present.

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