

The ABC's of HEPATITIS
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Do you understand the differences of the various forms of hepatitis? In order to clarify the differences, the following outline presents the routes of transmission, their common sources, the incubation periods, when a person is contagious, the severity of illnesses, and prevention treatments for each.

HEPATITIS A

Route of transmission: Fecal-oral

Common sources: Poor sanitation, contaminated food and water

Incubation period: 2-6 weeks

Contagious: 2 weeks before symptoms to 1 week after symptoms

Severity: Death is uncommon, does not cause chronic hepatitis or carrier state

Prevention: a 2 dose vaccine is 96% effective

HEPATITIS B

Route of transmission: Blood and body fluids

Common sources: Sharing needles with IV drug use, blood contaminated injuries (needlestick), mother to baby transmission at delivery, unprotected sexual contact (especially anal intercourse)

Incubation period: 6 weeks to 6 months

Contagious: Usually < 3 months, but may be lifetime

Severity :< 1% die from acute hepatitis, but chronic hepatitis occurs in 1-2% adults and 90% infants with 25-40% becoming carriers with increased risk of cirrhosis or liver cancer

Prevention: a 3-dose vaccine is 97% effective

HEPATITIS C

Route of transmission: Blood and body fluids

Common sources: 50% from IV drug use, prior to 1991 was from blood transfusions, now less than 1 in 200,000 transfusions, blood contaminated injuries, mother to baby at delivery, tattooing with contaminated equipment.

Incubation period: 6 weeks to 6 months

Contagious: 15%- < 3 months, 85% lifetime

Severity: 50% develop chronic hepatitis, with 30% of these developing cirrhosis or liver cancer, 40% of all liver disease in US, 51% of liver transplants, might be most common cause of primary liver cancer in US.

Prevention: No vaccine, avoid sharing razors and toothbrushes, cover wounds with dressings, self-clean-up of blood spills

Symptoms: All forms of hepatitis can have similar symptoms with varying degrees of severity: fatigue, right upper quadrant abdominal pain/tenderness, nausea, poor appetite, muscle and joint pains.

Treatment: Bedrest in acute phase (3-16 wks) as needed with gradual return to normal activities, with the majority having complete recovery. Avoid physical exertion, alcohol, and medications that may be toxic to the liver (check with your PCP). Antiviral medications have been developed that cure Hepatitis C in >90% of infected patients.