

## Know Your Hepatitis

Viral hepatitis is a serious illness caused by infection by any of the five hepatitis viruses, which are lettered A through E. The infection leads inflammation of the liver, which in turn causes symptoms ranging from nausea to liver failure. Different hepatitis viruses have different modes of transmission; some are blood-borne, others are spread by ingesting food or water contaminated with infected human waste. Sex with an infected person is another possible means of transmission. So far there are only vaccines for Hepatitis A and B, making it important to be informed about this global illness. Each virus is unique, so it is worthwhile to know the particulars of each so that one may be aware of any potential vulnerability.

Hepatitis A causes only acute (short-term) hepatitis (CDC, 2009). Mostly it is spread by ingesting food or water contaminated by infected human waste. For this reason, travelers to countries with subpar sanitation systems are recommended to receive the vaccination. As a further precaution, one should avoid drinking tap water or eating uncooked fruits or vegetables which may have been washed in water.

Hepatitis B is the other hepatitis virus for which there is a vaccination available. A hepatitis B infection can be either acute or chronic, and is transmitted via blood or bodily fluids. This means sexual activity, needle sharing, and being birthed by an infected mother are all viable modes of transmission. In an effort to quell the disease, it is recommended that everyone be vaccinated. Additionally, one should avoid sharing needles and razors with those who might be infected and always wear condoms when

having sex with anyone who may be infected (NDDIC, 2008). Even sharing needles for tattooing can be dangerous.

Hepatitis C is generally spread via infected blood, but is sometimes spread through sexual activity and childbirth. No vaccine exists for it, making it a serious threat to injection drug users and those who have frequent unprotected sex. Otherwise, prevention for hepatitis C is the same as for hepatitis B. Hepatitis C may be acute or chronic, and can lead to cirrhosis of the liver and death (CDC, 2009).

Hepatitis D occurs only as a co-infection with hepatitis B and is rare in the United States. As such, people vaccinated for hepatitis B are protected against hepatitis D. Nonetheless, the same precautions for hepatitis B should be followed for hepatitis D (Cohen, 2007).

Hepatitis E, which is rare in the United States, is spread via contaminated food or water. It is, however, one of the most serious of the hepatitis viruses. A vaccine has recently been created but its use will mostly likely be confined to areas rife with infection (Cohen, 2007).

In summary, viral hepatitis comes in several different flavors. General guidelines to prevent infection include getting vaccinated, practicing safe sex, minding what one eats and drinks, and avoiding the sharing of razors, needles, toothbrushes, and anything else that might have infected blood on it. College students studying abroad in countries with poor sanitation should be especially careful about eating fresh fruits and vegetables that might have been washed in contaminated water. Drinking or brushing teeth with tap water should be avoided; instead drink bottled drinks and brush teeth using boiled water or trustworthy bottled water.

Works Cited:

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