



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

November 29 – December 6, 2002

Hepatitis A, B and C – Just the Facts

There is a lot of information available about hepatitis. You may have heard some conflicting stories, as well as some frightening statistics. “Dragnet’s” Sgt. Joe Friday used to say, “Don’t believe everything your neighbor across the fence says; you need just the facts.” What exactly is hepatitis and how can you keep from becoming infected?

Hepatitis A, B and C (as well as D, E and G) are caused by viruses that lead to inflammation of the liver. The primary differences are how they are spread and the availability of a vaccine. Unfortunately, there is no cure.

The hepatitis A virus enters through the mouth, multiplies in the body and is passed in the stool (feces). The virus can then be carried on an infected person's hands and spread by direct contact or by consuming food or drink that handled by the infected individual. Symptoms may appear three to four weeks after exposure.

A person with hepatitis A may have no symptoms or may suffer fatigue, poor appetite, fever, vomiting, dark urine and jaundice (yellow color of the skin and whites of the eyes). The disease is rarely fatal and most people recover in a few weeks without any complications. How do you protect yourself

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and others? The best prevention is to thoroughly wash your hands after visiting the toilet or changing a diaper. Hepatitis A vaccine is recommended for high-risk individuals, including travelers to foreign countries, people living in communities with high rates of hepatitis A, sexually active homosexual/bisexual men, people with chronic liver disease and IV drug users.

Hepatitis B can cause liver cell damage, which can lead to scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) and an increased risk of liver cancer. About five to 10 percent of adults and 25 to 90 percent of children younger than five that are infected with the virus are unable to clear the virus from their bodies within six months and are considered to be chronically infected. They are commonly called hepatitis B carriers. It's estimated that there are one million to 1.25 million chronically infected Americans. Many people with acute hepatitis B have no symptoms at all, or they may be very mild and flu-like: loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fatigue, muscle or joint aches and mild fever. Some may notice dark urine, yellowing of the skin and eyes or light colored stools. A few patients may become sicker and may die of overwhelming liver failure.

Hepatitis B is transmitted through contact with body fluids containing the virus, such as blood, semen and vaginal secretions (menses). In a nutshell, anyone who is exposed to blood or body fluids of an infected person is at risk. Hepatitis B is most commonly passed from person to person through sexual contact. It can also be passed through exposure to sharp instruments contaminated with infected blood, such as tattooing, body piercing and acupuncture needles, as well as by sharing razors or toothbrushes with an infected person, and human bites.

In 30 to 40 percent of hepatitis B cases, the method of passing the virus to others is unrecognized. The virus can survive outside of the body for at least seven days on a dry surface and is 100 times more contagious than HIV (the virus that causes AIDS). Symptoms may appear two to six months after exposure, but usually within three months. The virus can be found in blood and other body

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fluids several weeks before symptoms appear and generally persists for several months afterward.

Approximately 10 percent of infected people may become long-term carriers of the virus and carriers may remain infectious for hepatitis B for years.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis B? Yes. It consists of three injections. The usual schedule includes a first injection, a second one in one month and a third injection five months later.

Although hepatitis C was discovered in the mid-1970s, it wasn't until 1989 that a test for specific antibodies to the virus became available. Each year, about 35,000 Americans become infected with hepatitis C, which is a more frequent cause of chronic liver disease than hepatitis B. Approximately 80 percent of the cases become chronic, possibly leading to cirrhosis or liver cancer. The virus, found in the blood, is transmitted the same way as hepatitis B. However, it's not clear whether semen or saliva can actually transmit the virus. The symptoms for hepatitis C and B are the same, though sometimes hepatitis C is asymptomatic (no symptoms). While efforts to develop a vaccine are underway, this virus changes rapidly, making development of a vaccine difficult.

If you're concerned that you or someone in your family may have hepatitis, see your physician.

For more information about hepatitis, contact Dr. Sandra L. Snow, Medical Director, Division of Communicable Disease/Immunizations, Arkansas Department of Health at (501) 661-2169.

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