



From the [AIDS.gov/hepatitis](https://aids.gov/hepatitis) blog: **African Americans and Viral Hepatitis**

## Viral Hepatitis in the African American Community

Viral hepatitis is a silent epidemic in the United States, affecting people of all ages, races and ethnicities. About 80,000 new infections occur each year. Unfortunately, viral hepatitis impacts the African American community more heavily than many other communities. Although it is a leading infectious cause of death and claims the lives of 12,000–15,000 Americans each year, viral hepatitis remains virtually unknown to the general public and populations at-risk, including African Americans. As a consequence, most of the 3.5–5.3 million Americans living with viral hepatitis do not know that they are infected. This places them at greater risk for severe, even fatal, complications from the disease and increases the likelihood that they will spread the virus to others.

### What Is Hepatitis?

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. It is most often caused by a virus. In the U.S., the most common types are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. All three of these viruses cause acute (short-term) hepatitis infections. Although hepatitis A, B and C can cause similar symptoms, they have different modes of transmission. Symptoms of all types of viral hepatitis can include one or more of the following:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Clay-colored bowel movements
- Joint pain
- Jaundice

The hepatitis B virus and hepatitis C virus can also cause chronic hepatitis, in which the infection becomes lifelong. Chronic hepatitis can lead to cirrhosis (scarring), liver failure, and liver cancer. In fact, viral hepatitis is the leading cause of liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplantation. Many people who are infected with chronic viral hepatitis often have no symptoms. In fact, people can be infected with chronic viral hepatitis and not feel sick or show symptoms for 20 to 30 years. When and if symptoms do appear, they are similar to acute infection, but can be a sign of serious liver damage.

## Your Liver

The liver is one of the largest and most important organs in the body. It is about the size of a football and is located on the upper right side of your abdomen. The liver performs hundreds of functions, including:

- Filtering your blood
  - Building proteins and other important chemicals important for digesting and healing
  - Storing vitamins, sugars, fats, and other nutrients
  - Transforming nutrients into material your body uses
- Hepatitis viruses cause damage to liver cells.

## Facts About African Americans and Viral Hepatitis

### Hepatitis B

- African American adults have the highest rate of acute hepatitis B infections in the United States.
- Hepatitis B can be prevented by a vaccine; however, African American children have lower hepatitis B vaccination rates than non-Hispanic White children.
- Since 2004, rates of hepatitis B have remained steady among all racial/ethnic populations. However, the rate of new hepatitis B infections remains the highest among Blacks, with 2.3 cases per 100,000 people.

### Hepatitis C

- African Americans are twice as likely to be infected with hepatitis C when compared with the general U.S. population and chronic liver disease, often hepatitis C-related, is a leading cause of death among African Americans ages 45-64.
- While African Americans represent about 12% of the U.S. population, they make up about 22% of the chronic hepatitis C cases. In fact, African Americans have a substantially higher rate of chronic hepatitis C infection than do Whites and other ethnic groups.
- Within the African American community, men in their 50's show the highest rates of infection with 1 in 7 men living with chronic hepatitis C.

### **Keys to reducing these viral hepatitis disparities include:**

- Educating the community about the silent epidemic and its impact;
- Improving awareness of how viral hepatitis is transmitted and can be prevented;
- Increasing vaccination coverage for hepatitis A and B;
- Getting people tested if they have been exposed to hepatitis; and
- Connecting those infected with chronic hepatitis to care and treatments to help them stay healthy.

## Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the hepatitis B virus. When first infected, a person can develop an “acute” infection, which can range in severity from a very mild illness with few or no symptoms to a serious condition requiring hospitalization. Acute hepatitis B refers to the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis B virus. Some people are able to fight the infection and clear the virus. For others, the infection remains and leads to a “chronic,” or lifelong, illness. Chronic hepatitis B refers to the illness that occurs when the hepatitis B virus remains in a person’s body.

### **How is hepatitis B spread?**

Hepatitis B is spread through contact with infected blood, sex with an infected person, and from mother to child during childbirth.

### **How can hepatitis B be prevented?**

The hepatitis B vaccine offers the best protection from infection. Hepatitis B vaccine is recommended for:

- All infants
- Older children who have not previously been vaccinated
- People with diabetes who are 19-59 years of age
- Sex partners of infected persons
- People with multiple sex partners
- People seeking evaluation or treatment for an STD
- Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men
- Injection drug users
- Household contacts of infected persons
- Healthcare and public safety workers who may be exposed to blood on the job
- People with chronic liver disease, including hepatitis C-infected persons
- People with HIV infection
- People with end-stage renal disease, including predialysis, hemodialysis, peritoneal dialysis, and home dialysis patients
- Residents and staff of facilities for developmentally disabled persons

- International travelers to regions with high rates of hepatitis B
- Anyone else seeking long-term protection

For people who have not been vaccinated for hepatitis B, reducing exposure to the virus can help prevent infection. Reducing exposure means using latex condoms, which may lower the risk of sexual transmission; and preventing contact with blood by not sharing drug needles; not sharing blood sugar testing equipment; and not sharing personal items such as toothbrushes, razors, and nail clippers with an infected person.

### **Who should be tested for hepatitis B?**

Unfortunately, many people have become infected with the hepatitis B virus before vaccine was available. To help identify people who may be living with chronic hepatitis B infection, testing is recommended for:

- Pregnant women
- People born in regions of the world with moderate to high rates of hepatitis B
- People born in the U.S., but whose parents were born in regions with high rates of hepatitis B
- Household, needle-sharing, or sex contacts of people living with hepatitis B
- Men who have sex with men
- Injection drug users
- Hemodialysis patients
- HIV-infected persons
- Healthcare providers and public safety workers who are exposed to blood or body fluids through needlesticks or other occupational exposures

## **Hepatitis C**

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C infection sometimes results in only mild (acute) illness, but most often becomes a serious, long-term (chronic) condition that can lead to liver damage, cirrhosis, liver failure, or liver cancer. Although most people have no symptoms, chronic hepatitis C is one of the leading causes of liver disease and is the leading cause of liver transplantation in the United States.

### **How common is hepatitis C?**

It is estimated that 3.2 million people in the United States are living with hepatitis C. Many people with hepatitis C do not have any symptoms, so they do not know they are infected until the virus causes liver damage, which can take many years. More than 18,000 people become infected each year. In addition to African Americans, other groups also have higher than average rates of hepatitis C

infection including individuals born between 1945-1965, people living with HIV, people who have injected drugs, and people who have been in jail or prison.

### **How is hepatitis C spread?**

Hepatitis C is spread primarily through contact with the blood of an infected person, often through sharing contaminated needles to inject drugs. Less commonly, it can be spread through sexual contact and childbirth. You cannot get hepatitis C from shaking hands with or hugging an infected person.

### **Who is at risk for hepatitis C?**

People most likely to be exposed to hepatitis C are:

- Injection drug users
- People who have sex with an infected person
- People who have multiple sex partners
- Health care workers
- Infants born to infected women
- Hemodialysis patients
- People who received a transfusion of blood or blood products before July 1992, when a reliable blood test was first introduced
- People who received clotting factors made before 1987

### **Who should be tested for hepatitis C?**

Since most Americans living with hepatitis C do not have any symptoms or know that they are infected, testing is critical and is recommended for:

- Recipients of blood transfusions or donated organs before July 1992
- Recipients of clotting factor concentrates before 1987
- Long-term hemodialysis patients
- Current or former injection drug users
- People with signs or symptoms of liver disease
- People with known exposures to hepatitis C (e.g., healthcare workers after needlesticks, recipients of blood or organs from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis C)
- HIV-infected persons
- Children born to infected mothers, after they reach 18 months of age

### **How can hepatitis C be prevented?**

There is no vaccine that can prevent hepatitis C, like there is for hepatitis B. The only way to prevent the disease is to reduce your risk of exposure to the virus. Here are some ways you can protect yourself from hepatitis C:

- Do not share needles or other equipment to inject cosmetic substances, drugs, or steroids.

- Do not share blood testing equipment such as glucose monitors.
- Do not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood, such as razors, nail clippers, or toothbrushes.
- Make sure any tattoos or body piercings you get are done with sterile tools and in a licensed facility.

### **Why is testing important?**

Although hepatitis C is a serious health problem within the African American community, too few African Americans at risk get tested. Fortunately, a simple blood test can determine if you have been exposed to the virus. See your doctor and ask to be tested if you think you may have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Early diagnosis and treatment can help prevent liver damage and save lives.

### **Can hepatitis C be treated?**

Hepatitis C is not treated unless it becomes a chronic infection. Treatment for hepatitis C eliminates the virus in many patients. In 2011, new drugs became available that shorten the length of treatment. Research suggests that African American patients respond better to these new treatments than earlier treatments.

## **Hepatitis C Deaths Surpass HIV Deaths**

Chronic hepatitis C virus infection is associated with more deaths than HIV infection, according to a CDC analysis of data from 1999-2007. Most viral hepatitis deaths occurred in people in the prime of their lives. The impact of chronic hepatitis C was most substantial among "baby boomers" with roughly 73% of the deaths related to hepatitis C in people born between 1945 and 1965.

## **Points to Remember**

- Hepatitis B and C are liver diseases caused by viruses.
- Anyone can get hepatitis B or hepatitis C, but African Americans are disproportionately burdened with these infections.
- Chronic hepatitis infections cause liver damage, liver cirrhosis, and liver cancer, often with no symptoms.
- Most people living with viral hepatitis do not know they are infected.
- Hepatitis B can be prevented with a safe and effective vaccine.
- Both hepatitis B and C viruses can be transmitted through exposure to blood or through sex.

- Getting a simple blood test is the only way to know if you have been exposed to viral hepatitis.
- Treatments exist for both hepatitis B and hepatitis C.

## **What Is the Government Doing About Viral Hepatitis?**

The Federal Government is committed to ensuring that new cases of viral hepatitis are prevented and that people who are already infected are tested and provided with counseling, care, and treatment. Agencies across the government are collaborating to implement the *Action Plan for the Prevention, Care and Treatment of Viral Hepatitis*, released in May 2011. The plan seeks to increase the proportion of Americans who are aware of their viral hepatitis infection; reduce the number of new cases of hepatitis C infection; and eliminate mother-to-child transmission of hepatitis B. Read more about the Action Plan at <http://www.aids.gov/hepatitis/>

### **Learn More**

To learn more about viral hepatitis prevention, screening and treatment, consult these sources:

#### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

Hepatitis Information for the Public  
 Viral Hepatitis Fact Sheet  
 Hepatitis C FAQs

#### **National Institutes of Health**

Viral Hepatitis  
 What I Need to Know About Hepatitis B  
 What I Need to Know About Hepatitis C

#### **Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**

Hepatitis C – for Veterans and the Public

#### **Office Disease Prevention and Health Promotion**

Healthfinder.gov's  
 Hepatitis A, B, and C: Learn the Differences

#### **Office on Women's Health**

Viral Hepatitis Facts

**Share with your friends and family what you have learned about viral hepatitis. If you think you or a loved one has been exposed, talk to your doctor or health care provider.**