

# Gloucester City Council

## *Factsheet*

### VIRAL HEPATITIS

#### **What is viral hepatitis?**

Viral hepatitis is inflammation of the liver caused by a virus. It is common worldwide. 5 types of Hepatitis have been identified.

#### **How is viral hepatitis spread?**

Viral Hepatitis can be caught in different ways depending on the type of virus causing the infection. Hepatitis A and E are spread by the consumption of food and drinking water contaminated with infected faeces; faecal-oral spread. Hepatitis B, C and D are spread by contact with blood or other body fluids from an infected person; blood-borne spread.

#### **What are the symptoms of acute viral hepatitis?**

Many patients have no symptoms at all, others just feel 'off colour' for a few days. The first symptoms noticed by most patients are often tiredness, weakness, muscle pains and headaches followed shortly by loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting and discomfort on the right side of the upper abdomen. These symptoms usually last for about three to ten days. They are followed by jaundice (a yellowing of the eyes and skin) and often dark urine with pale stools and a mild fever. The jaundice can last for up to six weeks during which the patient generally begins to feel better. Tiredness is usually the last symptom to disappear. Some patients also have painful joints and those with severe jaundice often complain of intense itching of the skin.

#### **How do the types of viral hepatitis differ from one another?**

##### **Hepatitis A:**

- A very common infection occurring worldwide especially in areas of poor hygiene and sanitation.
- Is excreted in the faeces of cases for about one week before and one week after their jaundice appears.
- Is transmitted by faecal-oral spread.
- The incubation period is between two and six weeks.
- The severity of infection varies with age; children often have no symptoms.
- To help prevent spread of the infection, everyone should wash their hands thoroughly before meals, before preparing food and after using the toilet or changing nappies.
- Travellers to parts of the world where hepatitis A is common, such as countries outside Northern and Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, should always peel raw fruit and vegetables before eating them, drink boiled or bottled water and not use ice cubes in their drinks.
- A vaccine is available to prevent hepatitis A in people who are frequent travellers to these countries or who reside in such areas for more than three months.



## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

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## Hepatitis B:

- Between 5 and 10% of adults with acute hepatitis B become chronic carriers of the virus and may develop serious liver disease later in their lives.
- Is present in various body fluids including blood, semen and vaginal fluids.
- Infection may be spread by sexual exposure; exposure to blood-contaminated needles and syringes or other sharp objects; by contamination of broken skin, the eyes or mouth with infected blood; by transfusion of blood or other blood products; by bites from an infected person.
- The incubation period is about 3 months.
- Very close (e.g. sexual) contacts of acute hepatitis B may be offered an injection of hepatitis B immunoglobulin as well as hepatitis B vaccine to try and prevent infection.

## Hepatitis C:

- Spread by the blood-borne route especially between intravenous drug abusers and following infected blood transfusions.
- The incubation period varies from two weeks to six months.
- The acute symptoms of hepatitis C are usually mild; about three-quarters of patients have no symptoms at all.

## Hepatitis D:

- Is known as the delta agent.
- It is uncommon in the United Kingdom where the infection is found mostly in injecting drug users.
- Infection with hepatitis D can only coexist with hepatitis B, it cannot infect on its own.
- Is spread in the same way as the hepatitis B virus and can infect a patient simultaneously with hepatitis B virus or may infect a patient who is already infected with the hepatitis B virus.

## Hepatitis E:

- Contaminated water is the usual source of infection.
- Is uncommon in the United Kingdom and usually occurs in travellers returning from abroad.
- Is spread by the faecal-oral route. The acute infection is usually mild and brief.

## How is hepatitis prevented?

- The virus can be removed from the skin by thorough washing with soap and water and it is destroyed on surfaces by chlorine based disinfectants such as bleach.
- Strict personal hygiene is most important. Young children are at risk because they do not understand the importance of good hygiene and forget to wash their hands at the right times. They are also likely to put things in their mouths or suck their fingers.
- Parents can help to control the spread of infection by making sure the whole family wash their hands thoroughly and dry them on clean towels **AFTER** using the toilet and **BEFORE** preparing or eating food.
- Raw fruit and vegetables and salads must be washed thoroughly.
- Avoid eating raw shellfish.
- Where a case of **HEPATITIS A** occurs in a family it is possible for your doctor to give household contacts an injection which gives some protection against the illness for up to 1 year. A second dose of the vaccine given 6-12 months after the initial dose provides protection for up to 10 years.

## Important facts for close contacts of cases

- Good personal hygiene is the most important part of the response to every case.
- The virus is also readily killed by washing crockery, cutlery, bed linen, towels, clothing etc. at very high temperatures (85°C) and cleaning surfaces with household bleach.
- If you are a close contact (household, sexual) or someone suffering from Hepatitis A you should visit your GP and ask for the Hepatitis A vaccine as soon as possible and certainly within 7 days.