

# What is Hepatitis?

Viral hepatitis is a global killer which claims the lives of 1.4 million people annually, more than HIV/AIDS or malaria. Yet the majority of people living with the disease do not know they are infected! Hepatitis can be prevented and treated, so it pays to know more about this disease and be proactive.

Dr. Tony Hampton, a family practice physician from Advocate Medical Group in Chicago, reviews the 3 most common types of hepatitis viruses:

**Hepatitis A** is present in the feces of an infected person and is most often transmitted when we eat contaminated food or water. There is a vaccination for hepatitis A and the body is often able to clear this infection by itself within a few weeks.

**Hepatitis B** is transmitted when we are exposed to infected blood and other body fluids. Hepatitis B can also be transmitted from mother to infants at the time of birth or early childhood. There is a vaccination that can prevent infection of hepatitis B as well as drugs available for treatment.

**Hepatitis C** is usually transmitted through exposure of infected blood through transfusions of contaminated blood or through contaminated injections with needles. While there is no vaccine for hepatitis C, there are medications that can eliminate the virus.

“All forms of hepatitis can be prevented with education,” says Dr. Hampton. Prevention begins with lifestyle changes to avoid contraction of hepatitis B and C, since they are spread through contact with blood or bodily fluids of people who are already infected with the virus.

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# Hepatitis C is Linked to Trauma

People who have experienced trauma or difficult experiences in their childhoods are 240% more likely to contract Hepatitis C infection when they are adults. Hepatitis C is passed between people when there is exposure to contaminated blood and mostly happens through blood transfusions or by sharing contaminated needles.

The prescription opioid abuse epidemic is also fueling an increase in new Hepatitis C infections. The Centers for Disease Control reports:

- Acute Hepatitis C cases in the US went up 150% between 2010 and 2013.
- Most of the new Hepatitis C cases are among young people who inject drugs in rural and suburban areas.
- Most of these young people began using oral prescription painkillers before transitioning to injecting drugs.
- Injection drug use is the most common risk factor for Hepatitis C transmission in the United States.

Drug use is one way that people may cope with the impact of abuse, neglect, poverty, violence, etc. The connection between having a history of trauma and being at risk for Viral Hepatitis suggests that being able to recognize and respond to trauma may be an important part of helping people cope with Viral Hepatitis.

Faith leaders can help people get the help that they need by talking frankly about Hepatitis C, encouraging people to get tested, and providing kindness and support to those who are infected.

“Hepatitis C is a very manageable condition that doesn’t have to have a severe impact on health if it is diagnosed and treated,” says Dr. Abdul Ghani, cardiologist at the Advocate Heart Institute at Advocate South Suburban Hospital in Hazel Crest, IL.

**Prayer:** *God of our bodies, minds and spirits. May our care for each other be a source of healing, hope and new life.*

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