



# How to Diagnose Viral Hepatitis

Expert  
Reviewed

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Viral hepatitis is a type of liver disease that can be caused by several different viruses. The most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, B, and C, although there are other varieties as well, such as hepatitis D and E. These viruses may be acute (if they are quickly eradicated from the body) or chronic (if the virus continues to infect the individual for a long period of time). People with viral hepatitis may or may not present symptoms, so blood tests are the most reliable means of diagnosis.<sup>[1]</sup>

Part  
1

## Recognizing Warning Signs of Viral Hepatitis

**1 Know the symptoms of acute viral hepatitis.** The symptoms of acute hepatitis typically begin suddenly and get progressively worse over the course of several days. If you have the following symptoms, see your doctor right away:<sup>[2]</sup>

- Anorexia
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Hives or itchy skin
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Pale colored stool
- Joint pain
- Jaundice
- Pruritis (itchiness)

**2 Understand that chronic hepatitis may be asymptomatic.** People with chronic hepatitis B and C often experience no symptoms at all, which makes these conditions much harder to diagnose. If you believe you have been exposed to viral hepatitis, you should see your doctor for testing, even if you feel fine.<sup>[3]</sup>

**3 Treat chronic fatigue seriously.** For patients who do experience symptoms from chronic hepatitis, fatigue is the most common. If you have chronic fatigue, do not ignore this symptom. See your doctor for blood tests to find out if viral hepatitis is the cause.<sup>[4]</sup>

- Because chronic fatigue can be caused by many other conditions and is sometimes a side effect of a busy lifestyle, people do not always recognize it as a symptom of hepatitis. This can lead to delayed diagnosis, and ultimately more liver damage.
- Chronic liver disease can lead to liver cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma (liver cancer). You may need a liver transplantation or medication to control these pathologies.

**4 Pay attention to your regular lab work.** Viral hepatitis is sometimes caught when patients have routine lab work that reveals abnormal liver functioning. If you have lab work done, check with your doctor to find out if your liver tests are normal.<sup>[5]</sup>

- If your routine lab work is abnormal, you will most likely be sent for more blood work in order to determine if you have viral hepatitis.
- The first test to be completed is the measurement of the AST and ALT, if these enzymes are elevated then you may possibly have hepatitis. However, there are other possible causes like alcoholism and gall bladder disease.

**Part  
2****Getting Tested for Hepatitis**

**1 Get a liver enzyme test.** One test that is commonly used to diagnose hepatitis is a liver enzyme test, also known as the AST and ALT test. This is a simple blood test that detects elevated levels of certain liver enzymes in the blood. Elevated levels suggest liver damage, which is often caused by viral hepatitis.<sup>[6]</sup>

- Liver damage may have other causes as well, so elevated liver enzymes do not always indicate a diagnosis of viral hepatitis.
- People with acute hepatitis are more likely to have extremely high enzyme levels that will subside to normal within a short amount of time, while people with chronic hepatitis are more likely to have slightly elevated enzyme levels that will remain elevated for an extended period of time.

**2 Get a viral antibody test.** A viral antibody test is another blood test that is commonly used to diagnose viral hepatitis. It detects the antibodies that the body's white blood cells has produced to fight the virus.<sup>[7]</sup>

- In patients with acute hepatitis, viral antibodies will still be detectable even after the body has eliminated the virus.
- Patients who have been vaccinated against hepatitis A or B will have antibodies in their blood, but this does not mean the virus is present.<sup>[8]</sup>
- For the rest of a patient's life, if they get tested for viral antibodies, and have had hepatitis vaccination, then the test will show surface antigen positivity, especially with the hepatitis B vaccination.

**3 Get tested for viral proteins and genetic material.** If your blood tests are positive for viral hepatitis antibodies, your doctor may also want to look for evidence of viral proteins and/or genetic material in your blood. When these are present along with antibodies, it indicates that the patient's body has not been able to fight off the virus, which may indicate a diagnosis of chronic hepatitis.<sup>[9]</sup>

- If your antibody test was positive, but there is no evidence of viral proteins or genetic material, this means your body has successfully eradicated the virus.

**4 Have tests to rule out other conditions.** Viral hepatitis can sometimes be confused with conditions that block the bile ducts, such as gallstones or cancer of the gallbladder. Even alcoholics can have unusual levels of enzymes that may need to be ruled out. Your doctor may want to do an ultrasound to rule out bile duct blockage as the cause of your symptoms.<sup>[10]</sup>

**5 Get further testing after a positive diagnosis.** If you have tested positive for hepatitis, your doctor may want to do further tests to understand how severe the condition is and what specific type of hepatitis you have. This will help your doctor recommend the best treatment plan for you.

- One of these tests is a liver biopsy, which is performed by inserting a long, thin needle through the skin and into the liver. This test measures the amount of liver damage caused by viral hepatitis.<sup>[11]</sup>
- If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C, you may need to have additional tests to identify the virus's genotype. Certain genotypes are more responsive to treatment than others, so knowing which type you have will help your doctor develop an appropriate treatment plan.<sup>[12]</sup>

**Part  
3****Assessing Your Risk Factors**

**1 Know if you are at risk for hepatitis C.** Hepatitis C is a type of viral hepatitis that is typically transmitted by blood contact. The following individuals are at a higher risk for contracting hepatitis C:<sup>[13]</sup>

- People who have had organ transplants or blood transfusions
- People who have used intravenous drugs
- People who have had kidney dialysis
- People who have HIV
- People who have been incarcerated
- People who have had tattoos or piercings with dirty needles

- People who were treated for clotting issues with blood products before 1987
- People who were born to mothers with hepatitis C
- People who have been exposed to the blood of an individual with hepatitis C

**2 Understand the risk factors for hepatitis B.** Like hepatitis C, hepatitis B is transmitted through contact with the bodily fluids of an individual who has the virus. The following people are at a higher risk for getting hepatitis B:<sup>[14]</sup>

- People who had a blood transfusion or received another blood product prior to 1972
- People who have had a tattoo or piercing (if an infected needle was used)
- People who have used intravenous drugs
- People who live with people who have hepatitis B
- People who have had multiple sex partners
- Men who have sex with other men
- People who have been to areas where hepatitis B is endemic
- People who were born to a mother with hepatitis B
- People who work in the healthcare field

**3 Learn how hepatitis A is transmitted.** Unlike hepatitis B and C, hepatitis A is transmitted through feces. People who do any of the following are at an increased risk of contracting hepatitis A:<sup>[15]</sup>

- Drink contaminated water
- Eat raw shellfish that came from contaminated water
- Eat food that has been handled in an unhygienic way by an infected person
- Come into contact with the feces of an infected person

## Tips

- Viral hepatitis can lead to serious complications, including liver failure.<sup>[16]</sup>
- There are many treatment options available for hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C, even if the disease is chronic. See your doctor for treatment as soon as possible to decrease your chances of developing complications.<sup>[17]</sup>
- People who have hepatitis B may also develop hepatitis D.<sup>[18]</sup> However, you need to have contracted hepatitis B first before you can develop hepatitis D. HDV infection is common in high-risk groups, such as injection drug users, individuals who have received multiple transfusions, and emigrants.
- Hepatitis E is also present in some parts of the world. It is very similar to hepatitis A.<sup>[19]</sup> Hepatitis E has a higher risk of sudden liver failure in pregnant women. Pregnant women who are jaundiced from hepatitis E also have poor obstetric and fetal outcomes.

## Sources and Citations

1. [http://www.questdiagnostics.com/testcenter/testguide.action%3Fdc%3DCF\\_ViralHepatitis](http://www.questdiagnostics.com/testcenter/testguide.action%3Fdc%3DCF_ViralHepatitis)
2. <http://www.merckmanuals.com/home/liver-and-gallbladder-disorders/hepatitis/acute-viral-hepatitis>
3. [http://www.medicinenet.com/viral\\_hepatitis/page5.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/viral_hepatitis/page5.htm)

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