Health Minister’s Guide to Viral Hepatitis: The Silent Epidemic

Your liver is the largest solid organ in your body.¹ The liver helps your body digest food, store energy, and remove toxins—all incredibly important to daily life. Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis can cause scarring of the liver—referred to as cirrhosis, liver cancer, liver failure, and death.

Chronic Viral Hepatitis is caused by either Hepatitis B or C. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over 21,000 deaths were caused by Hepatitis B and C in 2013. Although it is not a rare disease, Viral Hepatitis, known as the “silent killer,” remains largely ignored or unknown. Hepatitis B and C are common causes of liver cirrhosis, liver disease, and cancer in the United States.

Epidemiology of Viral Hepatitis

- As many as 5.3 million Americans are living with chronic Viral Hepatitis, though most do not know that they are infected.¹
- Chronic Viral Hepatitis is a leading infectious cause of death, claiming the lives of over 21,000 Americans in 2013.³
- Among people with new Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C infections, over 60% of people had no risk identified, they were not aware of how they were exposed to Viral Hepatitis.³

Hepatitis B

- 700,000 – 1.4 million people are chronically infected with Hepatitis B in the United States.³
- Hepatitis B is spread when blood, semen, or other body fluid from a person who is infected with Hepatitis B virus enters the body of someone who is not infected.
- In the U.S., chronic Hepatitis B is most common among people born in Asia and Africa.
- Transmission from mother to infant is the main source of Hepatitis B infection worldwide.⁴ In the U.S., an estimated 1,000 babies are infected at birth each year.⁵
- About 90% of infants infected with Hepatitis B will become chronically infected.
Hepatitis C

- 2.7 – 3.9 million people are chronically infected with Hepatitis C in the United States.iii
- Hepatitis C is usually spread when blood from a person infected with Hepatitis C enters the body of someone who is not infected; sexual transmission is less frequent.
- 75% of people with chronic Hepatitis C in the U.S. were born between 1945-1965.ii
- According to the CDC, between 2010 – 2013, there was a 150% increase in reported new Hepatitis C infections, mostly among people who have injected drugs.iii

Costs of Hepatitis

- Among patients with Hepatitis C, 24% were hospitalized compared with 7% of patients without Hepatitis C; all-cause health care costs for patients with chronic Hepatitis C were $20,961 per year compared with $5,451 for patients without Hepatitis C.iv
- The total cost associated with chronic Hepatitis C in 2011 was estimated at $6.5 billion and will increase to $9.1 billion by 2024.iv
- The lifetime cost of an individual infected with Hepatitis C in 2011 was estimated at $64,490. This cost, however, is higher among individuals with a longer life expectancy.ivi
- Health care utilization and costs are significantly lower among patients who have been cured of Hepatitis C, compared to patients who are chronically infected.vi

Symptoms of Hepatitis

Many people with Viral Hepatitis do not have symptoms. In order to protect yourself and others, it is important to get tested, get the health care needed, and understand how Viral Hepatitis is transmitted. When symptoms do appear, they may include one or more of the following:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Gray-colored bowel movements and dark-colored urine
- Joint pain
- Jaundice, which is when the skin and whites of eyes turn yellow

Preventing Viral Hepatitis

Viral Hepatitis can be prevented. Protecting yourself and others is very important since Viral Hepatitis can cause chronic liver disease. Here are some easy steps:

Vaccinate for Protection from Hepatitis B

- Safe and effective vaccines provide protection against Hepatitis B. Currently, the CDC recommends that all newborns and individuals up to 18 years of age as well as adults at risk of infection be vaccinated. Three shots over a 6 to 12 month period are required to provide full protection.
Lifestyle

Hepatitis B and C viruses are spread through contact with blood or body fluids from a person with the virus. The viruses are not spread through casual contact, such as holding hands, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, kissing, hugging, coughing, or sneezing.

There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C. Practicing these behaviors can protect you from Hepatitis C.

- Never share needles.
- Avoid direct exposure to blood.
- Don’t share personal items—such as toothbrushes, razors and nail clippers.
- Choose tattoo parlors carefully, ask about infection control precautions.
- Practice safe sex and use condoms.
- Use gloves and/or wash your hands after coming into contact with blood or other body fluids.

The Role of Health Ministers

Responders:

- Invite people affected by Viral Hepatitis to speak before the congregation.
- Light a candle and have a moment of silence and meditation for the healing of Viral Hepatitis and other chronic diseases.
- Plan activities in observance of Viral Hepatitis awareness days, including World Hepatitis Day on July 28th and Hepatitis Testing Day on May 19th.
- Host health-fairs and include materials from the CDC Know More Hepatitis campaign and other Viral Hepatitis vaccination and testing information.
- Provide vaccination, testing and linkages to care through partnering with the health department, a health center, and/or community agencies.
- Sponsor a Viral Hepatitis testing event and invite a ministry leader to get tested or vaccinated.
- Host a music/gospel concert in recognition of the impact of Viral Hepatitis in the community.
- Host a poetry slam for youth and invite local artists to perform Viral Hepatitis inspired poetry.
- Host a legislative briefing by faith leaders to raise awareness and/or share personal stories about Viral Hepatitis.
- Establish health ministries within the church and other faith-based institutions.
- Help people without insurance become insured and help those with insurance use it to get to get tested, vaccinated, or into care to attain optimal health.

Comforters: Become informed about trauma

People who have been recently diagnosed with Viral Hepatitis might be in a state of shock or disbelief. Additionally, the correlation between having a history of trauma and having or 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.
Many people in the high-risk groups for Viral Hepatitis have been traumatized. Always listen deeply to the person in need. Seek to understand the impact of adverse childhood experiences\(^\text{viii}\) among your congregation and community. Your program, organization, or system can become trauma-informed by:

- Realizing the widespread impact of trauma and understanding potential paths for recovery;
- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the program; and
- Responding by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.

**Connectors: Make sure everyone has health insurance, knows how to use it, and who to call for help**

Most private insurance plans, including all plans on the Health Insurance Marketplace, Medicare and Medicaid, have made significant changes to benefits and are required to cover many preventive services without cost sharing. This means that:

- There are no longer lifetime limits on healthcare spending for essential health benefits
- Services covered without cost-sharing include:
  - Screening for Hepatitis B virus infection in persons at high risk for infection.
  - Screening for Hepatitis B virus infection in pregnant women at their first prenatal visit.
  - Hepatitis B vaccinations.
  - Screening for Hepatitis C virus infection in persons at high risk for infection.
  - 1-time screening for Hepatitis C virus infection for adults born between 1945 and 1965.

More information on preventive hepatitis services is available at: [http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/PreventionThroughHealthcare/PreventiveServices/Hepatitis.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/PreventionThroughHealthcare/PreventiveServices/Hepatitis.htm)

---


Hepatitis C infographic suggesting people born between 1945-1965 get tested. Individuals born between 1945-1965 are 5x more likely to be infected with Hepatitis C; and, 3 out of every 4 people with Hepatitis C were born between these years.

Up to 75% of people living with Hepatitis C do not know they are infected. Many people can live with Hepatitis C for decades with no symptoms. If left untreated, Hepatitis C can cause liver damage and liver failure. Hepatitis C is the #1 cause of liver transplants. Hepatitis C is a leading cause of liver cancer. The benefits of getting tested are:

1) Knowing you have Hepatitis C can help you make important decisions about your health

2) Many people can get lifesaving care and treatment

3) Successful treatments can eliminate the virus from the body.