

Hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV

What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B (HBV) is a virus that causes infection of the liver. Most people who get hepatitis B recover on their own and develop antibodies to protect them from repeat infections. Less than 5% of adults with hepatitis B will continue to live with the virus. Hepatitis B can be spread from one person to another through exposure to infected blood and body fluids.

Symptoms can take two to six months to appear and can include loss of appetite, tenderness in abdomen, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, fever and jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes). Carriers do not have symptoms but can pass the virus on to others.

A blood test is the only way to detect hepatitis B. The virus may not show up in a blood test immediately after you have been infected, so follow up testing may be recommended.

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a virus that causes inflammation (swelling) of the liver. In some cases, hepatitis C can cause permanent liver damage and can lead to liver cancer. Hepatitis C is spread through contact with infected blood. For some people, the virus goes away on its own within six months of infection. Of those infected with the virus, 75-85% will have the virus for life and can infect others.

Most people show no symptoms of hepatitis C and may not develop symptoms for years after being infected. Symptoms may include fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, stomach pain, fever and jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes).

A blood test is the only way to detect hepatitis C. Hepatitis C will not show up in a blood test immediately after you have been infected, so follow up testing may be recommended. There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C, and not all hepatitis C infections can be cured. But, recent advances in medical treatment have led to cure rates of 98% for certain types.

What is HIV?

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is an infection that attacks and weakens a person's immune system. HIV is spread through contact with infected body fluids including blood, semen, rectal and vaginal fluids, and breastmilk.

Many people with HIV may not have symptoms. Some people experience mild flu-like symptoms when they first become infected including fever, sore throat or swollen glands. Other symptoms of HIV can include weight loss, night sweats and muscle and joint pain.

A blood test is the only way to detect HIV and testing can be done anonymously. Depending on the timing of the test, it may take up to three months before the test can detect the virus, so follow up testing may be recommended. There is no cure for HIV, however there have been significant advances in HIV treatment.

Test results for hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV may take up to two weeks to be received from Public Health Ontario Laboratories.

