

Hepatitis B and C Testing: Counseling Guide

Adapted from:

A Guide to Comprehensive Hepatitis C Counseling and Testing, CDC, 2016

Counseling Patients on Hepatitis B and C, Thomas Jefferson Health District



Virginia Department of Health,
Office of Epidemiology,
Division of Disease Prevention



Virginia Department of Health
109 Governor Street
Richmond, VA 23219

Fax: 804-864-7970

Table of Contents

Introduction for Pre-Test Counseling	3
Build Rapport	3
Educate about Viral Hepatitis and Transmission	3
Hepatitis B Virus (HBV)	3
Educate about the need for testing	3
Educate about the test itself	4
Make a Plan	4
Post-Test Counseling – Positive	4
Provide positive reinforcement	5
Allow for Questions	6
Additional Information	6
Post-Test Counseling – Negative	7
Help Clients Stay HBV-negative	7
Additional Information	8
Hepatitis C Virus (HCV)	8
Educate about the need for testing	8
Educate about the test itself	9
Make a Plan	9
Post-Test Counseling – Positive*	10
Provide Positive Reinforcement	11
Allow for Questions	11
Post-Test Counseling – Negative	12
Help Clients Stay HCV-negative	12
Additional Information	12

Introduction for Pre-Test Counseling

To establish initial rapport with the client, you should convey positive regard, genuine concern, and empathy toward him or her. This connection will help build trust and will set the tone for the rest of the appointment. It is important to be professional and respectful toward the client and to recognize that some behaviors, such as substance use, may be sensitive topics and make the client uncomfortable. The client should receive information on the test procedures, understand the role of the counselor, and be clear about the purpose of the session. The most important thing to understand when discussing a client's test result with him or her is to convey empathy.

Build Rapport

- Introduce yourself
- Explain your role in the testing process
- Explain the purpose of counseling
- Ensure confidentiality
- Address client needs and solicit questions

Educate about Viral Hepatitis and Transmission

Provide context to the client, who may be unaware of viral hepatitis.

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. The liver is an important organ that processes food, cleans the blood, and fights germs. When the liver is inflamed, it doesn't work well. Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. In the U.S. there are three common types of hepatitis – hepatitis A virus (HAV), hepatitis B virus (HBV), and hepatitis C virus (HCV). Hepatitis A, B, and C virus each affect the liver. People with hepatitis B or C may not know they are infected, as they may not have any symptoms for many years.

Hepatitis B Virus (HBV)

Hepatitis B can be an acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term) infection. An acute HBV infection occurs within the first six months after a person becomes infected. If a person clears the virus on their own, they develop immunity to HBV and cannot become re-infected. About 95% of those who become infected with HBV as adults will recover fully and do not become chronically infected (CDC, 2016).

Hepatitis B virus can be transmitted when blood, semen, or other body fluid infected with HBV enters the body of a person who is not infected. This can happen when people have sex with an infected partner; share needles, syringes, or other drug injection equipment; or share personal items, such as razors or toothbrushes, with an infected person. HBV can also be acquired at birth if the mother is infected. Even if you believe you may have been exposed to HBV once or twice a very long time ago and have no symptoms, you could still have hepatitis B.

Educate about the need for testing

Hepatitis B can lead to serious liver disease. People with hepatitis B may not know they are infected, as they may not have any symptoms for many years.

There are many benefits to knowing your HBV status. Many people with hepatitis B are able to stay healthy and take care of themselves. Some benefits to knowing your status may be:

If not infected, you can be assured you do not have hepatitis B (unless you engaged in certain behaviors within the past six months).

If infected:

- *You can go see a medical provider as soon as possible to discuss treatment options.*
- *You can find out if you have liver damage.*
- *You can find out if certain medications are right for you.*
- *You can start doing things to take care of your liver and prevent damage.*
- *You can avoid transmitting the virus to others.*

Educate about the test itself

Educate the patient about the test they are receiving.

- **HBV Combo Test (HBsAb+HBcAb+HBsAg) with Reflex to IgM**
 - *This test looks for a part of the hepatitis B virus, as well as certain antibodies your body would make if it were infected with hepatitis B. If your test is positive, another test will automatically determine if you were recently infected (acute infection) or have a long-lasting infection (chronic infection).*

Make a Plan

If the client needs to return for their results, help them plan for their return.

- **Probe**
 - *How confident are you that you can come back to get your test results?*
- **Help generate solutions**
 - *Let's talk about what we can do to make it easier for you to return for your test results.*

Post-Test Counseling – Positive

Persons infected with HBV can benefit from the counseling messages below.

- *You should see a healthcare provider with experience in caring for people with hepatitis B. This may be a primary care clinician or a specialist in hepatology, gastroenterology, or infectious diseases. This person can provide:*
 - *A medical evaluation of your health and your liver.*
 - *Advice on possible treatment options and strategies.*
 - *Advice on how to monitor liver health, even if treatment is not recommended.*
 - *Advice on resources available to assist with the cost of treatment.*
- *A provider referral listing can provided by the VDH Disease Prevention Hotline (1-800-533-4148).*
- *You can protect your liver from further harm by:*

- *Receiving a hepatitis A vaccination if susceptible.*
- *Limiting or discontinuing alcohol consumption and/or illegal drug use.*
- *Consulting with a healthcare provider before taking new medications, including over-the-counter and herbal agents.*
- *Obtaining a HIV risk assessment and testing.*
 - *Both HBV and HIV are spread in semen, blood, or other body fluids. The main risk factors are the same, and according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 10% of people with HIV have HBV. Infection with both HIV and HBV is called a coinfection. (HIV and Viral Hepatitis, CDC, 2017) <https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/library/factsheets/hiv-viral-hepatitis.pdf>.*
- *If you are overweight (BMI ≥ 25 kg/m²) or obese (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m²):*
 - *Consider weight management or losing weight.*
 - *Eating healthy foods and stay physically active.*
 - *Being overweight or obese, among other factors, increases the risk for fatty liver disease, which can lead to cirrhosis (liver scarring).*
- *In order to minimize the risk of transmission to others:*
 - *If you are pregnant, or planning to become pregnant, engage in prenatal care and discuss HBV status with your provider.*
 - *Do not donate blood, tissue, or semen.*
 - *Do not share equipment or personal items that might be exposed to blood, such as toothbrushes, dental appliances, blood glucose monitors, razors, tweezers, and nail clippers.*
 - *Use protection during sex.*
 - *Encourage sexual partners and those in your household to get the HBV vaccine.*

Provide positive reinforcement

It is important to remember that many people with hepatitis B remain healthy throughout their lives.

- *Many people live with few or no symptoms.*
- *There is a lot that people with hepatitis B can do to keep themselves healthy – like avoiding alcohol (which can accelerate liver damage), eating healthy foods, and staying physically active to maintain a healthy weight.*
- *There are treatments available to help manage HBV infection. A healthcare provider will determine the best course of action.*
- *There are steps that can be taken to prevent the transmission of hepatitis B.*

Your client may ask how they could have gotten hepatitis B, especially if they do not report any risk behaviors. It may be reassuring to some clients that many people do not know how, when, and where they were infected. Try to focus on the present by encouraging them to look at ways to preserve their health. If they have engaged in any past risk behaviors, clients may feel a sense of guilt or responsibility. Again, it may be more helpful to focus on immediate steps to care for

their health and avoid any comments or judgements on past behavior. If your client asks about modes of transmission, provide as much detail as is appropriate to the situation.

You may have some questions about how hepatitis B can be transmitted. Since this is a blood-borne infection:

- *HBV is not spread by sneezing, hugging, holding hands, coughing, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or through food or water.*
- *Speak to your provider prior to breastfeeding. There are several factors that need to be considered first (e.g. infant vaccination status, etc.).*
- *You can cook and eat together with your family.*
- *However, sharing personal items that might have blood on them, such as toothbrushes or razors, can pose a risk to others.*
- *Cover any wounds or open sores that cause you to bleed so that no one can be exposed to your blood.*

Allow for Questions

What questions do you have for me?

Allow the client to ask questions about hepatitis B, the test, their results, treatment, and/or next steps. Utilize available resources to get them answers to questions of which you are unsure.

Additional Information

Sexual Risk

Hepatitis B can be transmitted through sex. In fact, about two-thirds of all acute HBV cases are acquired from sexual contact. The hepatitis B virus is 50-100 times more infectious than HIV. Using latex condoms during sexual intercourse can help protect against viral hepatitis, HIV, and other STDs.

Current Drug Use

Hepatitis B can be transmitted through injection and/or non-injection drug use. Sharing needles, syringes, and other equipment used to inject or snort drugs with someone who is HBV-positive can lead to infection. If a person is unable or unwilling to stop injection and/or non-injection drug use, it should be strongly encouraged that they receive the hepatitis B vaccine and take steps to reduce the chance of becoming infected.

Other Needs

When clients test positive, there are a lot of factors that contribute to their ability and willingness to receive treatment. Clients may need additional services and resources in order to become healthy. Clients identifying or exhibiting signs of substance use dependence or abuse should be counseled about treatment options and resources. If a person presents with other physical health issues, such as an open wound, the client should be referred to a clinic for care. Mental health services may also be necessary. Other potential community services that could benefit low-income clients include: housing, transportation, food shelters, contraception, and other basic needs services.

Post-Test Counseling – Negative

Persons not infected with HBV can benefit from the counseling messages below.

HBV Test	HBV Result	Interpretation	Messaging
HBsAg HBcAb HBsAb	Negative Negative Negative	Susceptible	<i>Your hepatitis B test indicates that you do not have hepatitis B. It also shows that you did not receive the HBV vaccine, making you susceptible to getting HBV in the future. You should consider getting vaccinated to protect yourself from HBV.</i>
HBsAg HBcAb HBsAb	Negative Positive Positive	Immune – Due to Previous Infection	<i>Your hepatitis B test indicates that you do not currently have hepatitis B. It does show that you were once infected with HBV, but now have immunity from becoming infected again.</i>
HBsAg HBcAb HBsAb	Negative Negative Positive	Immune – Due to Vaccination	<i>Your hepatitis B test indicates that you do not have hepatitis B. It shows that you have received the HBV vaccine, so you should have immunity from becoming infected.</i>

Help Clients Stay HBV-negative

- Assess knowledge about HBV transmission
 - *Can you tell me what you know about how to avoid getting hepatitis B?*
- Education about how to avoid HBV
 - *Find out if you have been vaccinated and get the vaccine if you are susceptible and at risk.*
 - *Use a latex condom during sex to avoid infection with viral hepatitis, HIV, and other STDs.*
 - *Do not share needles, syringes, or any other equipment to prepare, inject, or snort drugs.*
 - *Wash hands before and after injecting.*
 - *Do not use personal items that may have been exposed to an infected person's blood, such as razors, nail clippers, or toothbrushes.*
 - *Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting.*
- Educate about how HBV is not transmitted
 - *Hepatitis B is not spread by kissing; hugging; shaking hands; sharing food, glasses, or utensils; coughing; sneezing; mosquitoes; animals; or through food or water.*
- Allow for Questions
 - *Are there other ways for hepatitis B to be transmitted that you have heard about or are concerned about?*

Additional Information

Vaccination

The hepatitis B vaccine has been successfully integrated into the childhood vaccine schedule in the U.S. Roughly 95% of new HBV cases are reported among adults. Unvaccinated adults who engage in behaviors that increase the risk of becoming infected with HBV, as well as unvaccinated adults who are household contacts and/or sexual partners of a person infected with HBV should receive counseling on the benefits of vaccination. The CDC recommends that men who have sex with men (MSM), and/or anyone without prior vaccination be vaccinated for hepatitis B and hepatitis A.

Hepatitis C Virus (HCV)

Hepatitis C is most often a chronic (long-term) infection. Hepatitis C can be an acute (short-term) infection among those who are able to clear the virus on their own. Approximately 15-25% of people with an acute hepatitis C infection will resolve, or clear it, on their own. Hepatitis C becomes a chronic infection in 75-85% of cases, and 20% of those chronically infected will develop cirrhosis. A person who clears HCV on their own, or is treated with antiviral medication, does not develop immunity and can become re-infected with HCV. There is currently no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is primarily transmitted through blood-to-blood contact. This can happen when people use or share drug-injection and non-injection (e.g. straws for snorting) equipment or surfaces, either intentionally or by accident. Injecting drugs with other people can significantly increase the chances of becoming exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Even if you only injected drugs once or twice a very long time ago and have no symptoms, you could still have hepatitis C.

Educate about the need for testing

Hepatitis C can lead to scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), the need for a liver transplant, or death. People with hepatitis C may not know they are infected, as they may not have any symptoms for many years.

There are many benefits to knowing your HCV status. Many people with hepatitis C are able to stay healthy and take care of themselves.

Some benefits to knowing your status may be:

If not infected, you can be assured that you do not have hepatitis C (unless you engaged in certain behaviors within the last six months).

If Infected:

- You can go see a medical provider as soon as possible. There is a cure for hepatitis C.*
- You can find out if you have liver damage.*
- You can find out if medical treatment is right for you.*
- You can start doing things to take care of your liver and prevent damage.*
- You can avoid transmitting the virus to others.*

Educate about the test itself

Educate the patient about the type of test they are receiving.

- Rapid HCV test:

This test only determines whether or not antibodies for HCV are found in the blood. Antibodies are proteins your immune system makes when it encounters a virus. The presence of antibodies for HCV means that you have been exposed to HCV at some point in your life. If your test is reactive/positive, then you will need another test to confirm whether or not you have a current HCV infection.

Explain to the patient that they now need a confirmatory RNA test to determine if there is hepatitis C virus in their blood, which would indicate that they have an active HCV infection.

- HCV Antibody with Reflex to Qualitative NAAT

This test will first determine whether or not antibodies for HCV are found in your blood. Antibodies are proteins your immune system makes when it encounters a virus. The presence of antibodies for HCV means that you have been exposed to HCV at some point in your life. If antibodies are identified, your blood sample will be automatically tested again to determine if you have hepatitis C virus in your blood, which would indicate that you have an active HCV infection.

Provide the patient with information about how you will be communicating their test results and when they should expect their results.

- Educate the patient about the limitations of the test.

It is important to realize that this test will not show positive result if you were recently infected. It can take 8 to 9 weeks for the body to make enough antibodies to be detected by this test. If you think you may have been exposed to HCV within the past 6 months, you should return for another test. If you continue certain behaviors that put you at risk for HCV, you should also come back to be tested every twelve months.

Make a Plan

If the client needs to return for their results, help them plan for their return.

- Probe
 - *How confident are you that you can come back to get your test results?*
- Help generate solutions
 - *Let's talk about what we can do to make it easier for you to return for your test results.*

Post-Test Counseling – Positive*

*Depending on the type of Hepatitis C test performed, the client may need additional testing to confirm a chronic infection. Please refer to the QA manual for an overview of the process.

HCV Ab Result	HCV RNA Result	Interpretation	Messaging
Ab Negative	N/A	No infection	<i>Your hepatitis C test indicates that you have not been exposed to the virus. If you think you may have been exposed recently, you should return for another test.</i>
Ab positive	RNA negative	Previous infection	<i>Your hepatitis C test indicates that you have been exposed to the virus, but were able to clear it. It is important to know that you can still become re-infected with HCV.</i>
Ab positive	RNA positive	Current infection	<i>Your hepatitis C test indicates that you are currently infected with HCV. (Proceed with counseling messages outlined below).</i>

Persons infected with HCV can benefit from the counseling messages below.

- *You should see a healthcare provider with experience in caring for people with hepatitis C. This may be a primary-care clinician or a specialist in hepatology, gastroenterology, or infectious diseases. This person can provide:*
 - *A medical evaluation of your health and your liver.*
 - *Advice on possible treatment options and strategies.*
 - *Advice on how to monitor liver health, even if treatment is not recommended.*
- *You can protect the liver from further harm by:*
 - *Receiving hepatitis A and B vaccination if susceptible.*
 - *Limiting or discontinuing alcohol consumption and/or illegal drug use.*
 - *Consulting with a healthcare provider before taking new medications, including over-the-counter and herbal agents.*
 - *Obtaining a HIV risk assessment and testing. According to the CDC approximately 25% of people with HIV in the U.S. also have HCV. Among people with HIV who inject drugs, nearly 75% also have HCV. Infection with both HIV and HCV is called a coinfection. In people with a HIV/HCV coinfection, HIV may cause chronic HCV to advance faster. (HIV and Viral Hepatitis, CDC, 2017)*
<https://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/library/factsheets/hiv-viral-hepatitis.pdf>
- *If you are overweight (BMI ≥ 25 kg/m²) or obese (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m²):*
 - *Consider weight management or losing weight.*
 - *Eat healthy foods and stay physically active.*
 - *Being overweight or obese, among other factors, increases the risk for fatty liver disease, which can lead to cirrhosis (liver scarring).*
- *In order to minimize the risk of transmission to others:*
 - *If you are pregnant, or planning to become pregnant, engage in prenatal care and discuss your HCV status with your provider.*
 - *Do not donate blood, tissue, or semen.*

- *Do not share equipment or personal items that might come into contact with blood, such as toothbrushes, dental appliances, blood glucose monitors, razors, tweezers, and nail clippers.*

Provide Positive Reinforcement

It is important to remember that many people with hepatitis C remain healthy throughout their lives.

- *Hepatitis C can be cured.*
- *Current treatment options have minimal side effects and are highly effective.*
- *Many people live with few or no symptoms.*
- *There is a lot that people with hepatitis C can do to keep themselves healthy – like avoiding alcohol (which can accelerate liver damage), eating healthy foods, and staying physically active.*
- *There are steps that can be taken to prevent transmission of hepatitis C.*
- *There are patient assistance programs available through the pharmaceutical companies to help pay for the treatment.*
- *If you are coinfectd with HIV and utilize Virginia’s AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) you can also receive your hepatitis C treatment through ADAP.*

Your client may ask how they could have gotten hepatitis C, especially if they do not report any risk behaviors. It may be reassuring to some clients that many people do not know how, when, and where they were infected. Try to focus on the present by encouraging them to look at ways to preserve their health. If they have engaged in any past risk behaviors, clients may feel a sense of guilt or responsibility. Again, it may be more helpful to focus on immediate steps to care for their health and avoid any comments or judgments on past behavior. If your client asks about modes of transmission, provide as much detail as is appropriate to the situation.

You may have some questions about how hepatitis C can be transmitted. Since this is a blood-borne infection:

- *HCV is not spread by sneezing, hugging, holding hands, coughing, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or through food or water.*
- *You can cook and eat together with your family.*
- *However, sharing personal items that might have blood on them, such as toothbrushes or razors, can pose a risk to others.*
- *If you are pregnant, engage in prenatal care and discuss HCV status with your provider.*
- *Cover any wounds or open sores that cause you to bleed so that no one can come in contact with your blood.*

Allow for Questions

What questions do you have for me?

Allow the client to ask questions about hepatitis C, the test, their results, treatment, and/or next steps. Utilize available resources to get them answers to questions of which you are unsure.

Post-Test Counseling – Negative

Help Clients Stay HCV-negative

- Assess knowledge about HCV transmission
 - *Can you tell me what you know about how to avoid getting hepatitis C?*
- Educate about how to avoid HCV
 - *Do not share needles, syringes, or any other equipment to prepare, inject, or snort drugs.*
 - *Wash hands before and after injecting.*
 - *Do not use personal items that may have been exposed to an infected person's blood, such as razors, nail clippers, or toothbrushes.*
 - *Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting.*
 - *Using a latex condom during sex with an infected person may decrease risk, especially if you have HIV.*
 - *Even if you have had hepatitis C and cleared the infection on your own or have been treated, you are still able to become re-infected.*
- Invite questions
 - *Are there other ways for hepatitis C to be transmitted that you have heard about or are concerned about?*
- Educate about how HCV is not transmitted
 - *Hepatitis C is not spread by kissing; hugging; shaking hands; sharing food, glasses, or utensils; coughing; sneezing; food; water; mosquitos; or animals.*

Additional Information

Baby Boomer Cohort

Individuals born from 1945-1965 (known as baby boomers) are five times more likely to have HCV than other adults (CDC, 2015). Although the reason for the high prevalence among this birth cohort is not completely understood, there are multiple factors that are believed to have contributed to the high rates of hepatitis C. Hepatitis C was first discovered in 1989. Baby boomers could have been infected from medical equipment or procedures before universal precautions and infection control procedures were adopted. Others could have been infected from contaminated blood and blood products before widespread screening virtually eliminated the virus from the blood supply by 1992. Sharing needles or equipment used to prepare or inject drugs, even if only once, could spread hepatitis C. Still, many people do not know how or when they were infected (CDC, 2016).

Sexual Risk

While the hepatitis C virus can be passed during sex, it is uncommon. If you have one, long-term, steady sexual partner, the chance is very low that you will give hepatitis C to that person through sexual activity.

However, having multiple sex partners has been shown to increase the risk of transmitting the virus. Although there are no research findings that conclude that condoms are effective in preventing sexual transmission of hepatitis C, anyone with multiple sex partners should use condoms to protect against other STDs and HIV.

Pregnancy

The CDC recommends testing pregnant women if they have or are suspected to have risk factors for HCV infection. CDC is in the process of reviewing the evidence to determine if additional HCV screening recommendations, specific to pregnant women are warranted. (CDC, 2018 <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/hcvfaq.htm#section3>). Some clients may want to know about having children when the mother is HCV-positive. Approximately 6 of every 100 infants born to mothers infected with HCV will also become infected at birth (CDC, 2017). There is no evidence that HCV can be transmitted through breastfeeding, however you should consult your provider prior breastfeeding as there are considerations and circumstances that may need to be evaluated.

Current Drug Use

The best way to prevent hepatitis C infection is to stop injecting. However, if a person is unable or unwilling to stop, then there are steps he or she can take to reduce the risk of becoming infected with hepatitis C.

- Always use a new needle or syringe and sterile preparation equipment for every shot. All equipment used to prepare and inject drugs is equally infectious when contaminated and shared.
- Use low dead-space syringes (rather than high dead-space needles). The term “dead-space” refers to the area where fluid remains after the plunger is completely depressed.
- Use new preparation equipment, such as cookers, filters, ties, water, alcohol swabs, etc.
- Wash hands with soap and water before and after injecting, especially when injecting others.
- Clean injection site with alcohol before injecting – but not after, because it increases scarring.
- Set up a clean surface before placing down your injection equipment to reduce the chances of being exposed to hepatitis C.
- Do not inject another person.
- Do not touch another person’s injection equipment.
- Don not let someone else inject you.

Additional information is available through “A Guide to Comprehensive Hepatitis C Counseling and Testing”, published by the CDC.

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/resources/professionals/pdfs/counselingandtesting.pdf>