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## **Hepatitis Awareness**

What do illegal drugs, unprotected sex, tattoos, and body piercing have in common? They're all things parents probably lecture kids about avoiding. But there's another connection as well – they can all lead to hepatitis, a serious liver infection.

Viral hepatitis is inflammation of the liver caused by a virus. There are five different types of viral hepatitis and each one is caused by a different virus. In the United States, hepatitis A, B and C are the most common types.

The symptoms of newly acquired acute hepatitis A, B and C are the same, “said Sue Smith of the Otsego County Department of Health. “Symptoms can include: tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, clay-colored bowel movements and yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice).

Hepatitis A virus is spread by putting something in the mouth that has been contaminated with the stool of a person who has hepatitis A. Most infections result from contact with a household member or sex partner. Casual contact, as in the workplace or school, does not spread the virus.

There is no specific treatment for hepatitis A and most people recover without complications. Once you get hepatitis A, you cannot be re-infected. Fortunately, there is an effective vaccine to prevent against it.

Hepatitis B and C are spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. For example, hepatitis B and C can be spread through having sex with an infected person without using a condom or by sharing drugs, needles or “works” when injecting drugs. They can also be spread through needle sticks or “sharps” exposure on the job, or from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

Hepatitis B is the most common serious liver infection in the world. Most people are able to fight off a hepatitis B infection and clear the infection from their blood. However, 5 to 10 percent of adults, 30 to 50 percent of children and 90 percent of infants will develop chronic infection which can lead to liver failure, cirrhosis (scarring) or cancer of the liver.

Fortunately, there is a safe and effective vaccine to protect against hepatitis B. It is recommended that all infants, children and adolescents up to the age of 18 receive the vaccine. The vaccine is also recommended for adults who may be at high risk for infection.

Hepatitis C causes liver disease and is found in the blood of people who are infected. Hepatitis C infects about 25,000 Americans each year, with most developing chronic infection. Many people who are infected do not even know it. People who inject drugs are at highest risk even if they only injected one time many years ago.

Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. Over the years, treatments are becoming more effective. However treatment is not for everyone and a specialist should be consulted to determine the appropriate course of action.

For more information about hepatitis, contact your health care provider, visit on-line at [www.nyhealth.gov](http://www.nyhealth.gov) or call:

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