

Is It That Time of Month?:

Hepatitis A, B, Non-A/Non-B

You pull yourself out of bed, groaning and aching, and feeling like crap. You had a good time at the bar last night, but really didn't party any heartier than usual. So you pop two or three aspirins, squirt some Visine in your eyes, and prepare for the day ahead, thinking your "hangover" will be gone by lunchtime.

But it isn't. You feel just as lousy three days later as you did that first morning. There's no energy, no appetite, a slight fever, nausea, perhaps pain in the joints and a sore throat. A few days later your urine may turn dark and your stool a light color. After that, you may begin to take on a slight "glow," with a sickly yellow hue to your skin and the whites of your eyes.

What do you do? Pick up the phone and give the doctor a call! You have the symptoms of hepatitis.

Hepatitis--an inflammation of the liver--is a serious disease which can affect anyone in the general population. But, just as with some other afflictions, gays are particularly hard hit, due to our proclivity for "intimacies" with several partners. This disease is actually three different diseases, all with some common symptoms and consequences.

TYPE A HEPATITIS

Type A Hepatitis--"infectious hepatitis"--is, by far, less dangerous than the other two types. The virus that carries Hepatitis A lives in the intestinal tract and is passed in the infected person's feces. This virus can be introduced into a person's digestive system (and ultimately to the liver) by contaminated fingers in the mouth, anal-oral contact, contaminated penis to mouth, or a number of other ways. H-A does not cause chronic liver disease, does cause an immunity against further H-A developing in its "victim," and, once the infection is gone, cannot be transmitted from the formerly-infected person to anyone else. Treatment for exposure to H-A includes a gamma globulin shot, which is very inexpensive, and abstaining from drugs and alcohol for a doctor-specified time.

TYPE B HEPATITIS

Type B, or "serum hepatitis," was originally believed to be transmitted only during a blood transfusion from an infected person or by the use of a syringe that had been used on an infected person. It has been learned that the guilty virus is in other body fluids--saliva, semen, urine--as well as the blood. Anal intercourse and deep "French" kissing can transfer H-B. H-B is dangerous. It can survive in the body for years, wreck the

liver, and infect large numbers of people over a period of time. Infected persons can remain carriers of H-B for as long as they live. Five to ten percent of gay men may be chronic carriers of H-B and not even know that they've had the disease, since sometimes the symptoms are so mild they're never even noticed.

Treatment for exposure to H-B, though the same as for H-A, is different. Gamma globulin is still used, but it's a different kind and much more costly. Again, abstinence from alcohol and many drugs is a must.

VACCINE FOR HEPATITIS-B

Now, finally, for some good news! In 1982, Merck Sharp & Dohme introduced a new drug: Heptavax-B. Made from the blood of H-B carriers, Heptavax-B is a vaccine for H-B and has proven to be very successful. The vaccine is expensive--but well worth the cost--and very limited in supply. A series of three shots over a period of six months constitutes the vaccination, which may provide immunity for up to five years. The vaccination has not been known to have any serious side-effects. More good news: the Heptavax-B vaccination is available at the Student Health Service. This is a preventive measure, however, and will not "cure" chronic carriers.

HEPATITIS NON-A/NON-B

The "newest" type of hepatitis, Hepatitis Non-A/Non-B, is still somewhat of a mystery. The only things known for sure are that it is transmitted in blood, can cause permanent liver damage, and that a person can be a chronic carrier. A person is diagnosed as having Hepatitis Non-A/Non-B once H-A and H-B have been ruled out by tests. Even though H-A type gamma globulin may not be an effective treatment, it is used. It can do no harm, after all.

Hepatitis in any form is a disease that must be taken seriously, especially by gays. It is important to recognize the symptoms and get prompt medical attention. If you don't have symptoms, it's still a good idea to have a blood test for H-A, H-B, and H Non-A/Non-B at least once a year. If you've never had, or don't have, H-B, a very wise move would be to have the Heptavax-B vaccination.

Two good books dealing with hepatitis and other gay-related health concerns are:

The Gay Health Guide by Robert L.

Rowan, M.D. and Paul J. Gillette, Ph.D. (Little, Brown & Company) and

Gay Men's Health by Jeanne Kassler, M.D. (Harper & Row)

-Ron.