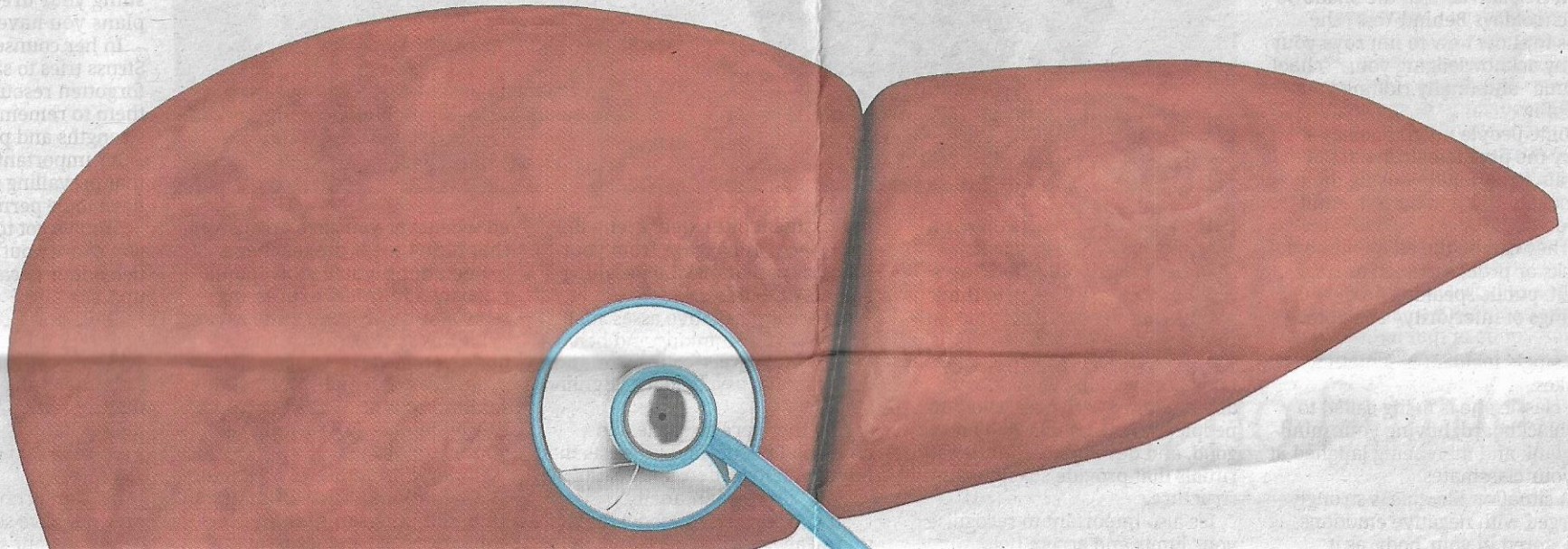
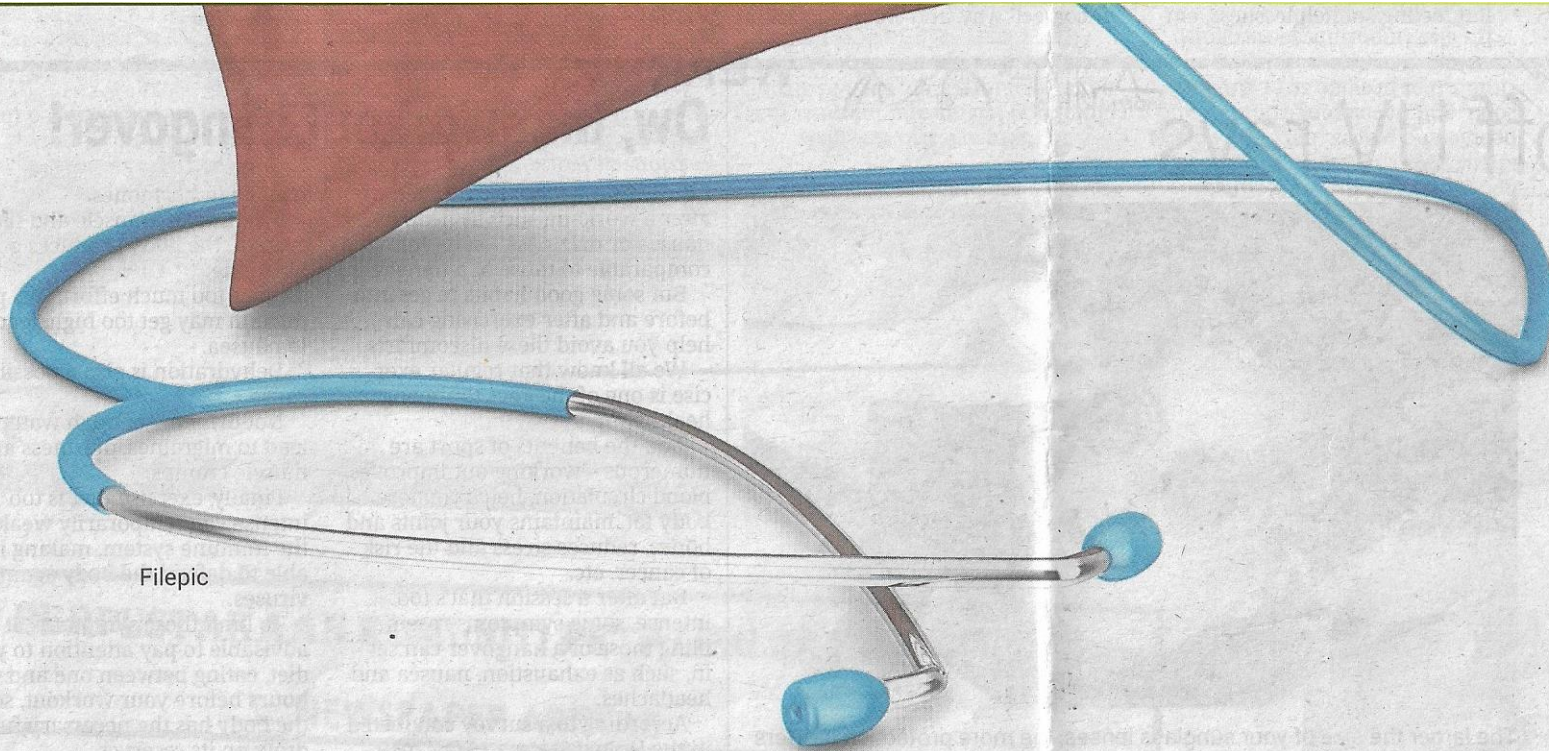


# When your liver is inflamed

In conjunction with World Hepatitis Day last Thursday, we take a look at this infectious condition, including the acute hepatitis of unknown origin striking young children worldwide.





Filepic

AS Malaysians, we are true believers of the saying “sharing is caring”.

We are always ready to lend a helping hand, making the time and effort to aid those in need, and in most cases, sharing what we have with our loved ones, or even strangers.

But what if someone told you that not everything is meant to be shared, or that sometimes, sharing can truly mean the difference between life or death, especially in certain matters of health?

Dramatic?  
Probably.

Realistic?  
Absolutely.

There are a number of diseases that can be passed on by the mere act of sharing, such as the sharing of utensils, food and needles.

Some of the ailments that result from this can range from a minor flu to some of the most life-threatening illnesses, including hepatitis.

### What is hepatitis?

World Health Organization (WHO) Strategic and Technical Advisory Committee for Viral Hepatitis founding co-chairperson

Professor Dr Rosmawati Mohamed explains: “Hepatitis essentially means inflammation of the liver, the second largest organ in our body.

“Our liver has multiple vital roles that help us function daily.

“It processes our nutrients, filters our blood and fights off infections.

“So, when our liver gets inflamed or damaged, essential functions in our body are affected.

“Hepatitis can be caused by multiple factors, including medications, toxins and heavy alcohol consumption.”

She adds: “The most common cause of hepatitis comes from a virus, and different viruses cause different types of hepatitis, such as hepatitis A, B, C, D and E.

“Since different viruses cause different types of hepatitis, the symptoms, treatment and management will also differ (see *Types of hepatitis*).

“Unlike hepatitis A, hepatitis B and C cause long-term or chronic infection, potentially leading to cirrhosis (liver scarring) and liver cancer.”

Hepatitis B increased from 2.26 per 100,000 population in 2010, to

12.65 per 100,000 in 2015, in Malaysia.

As for hepatitis C, it increased from 2.56 per 100,000 population in 2010, to 6.91 per 100,000 in 2015.

Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah said that one million people were estimated to be chronically infected with the hepatitis B virus in 1998, while 453,700 were infected with the hepatitis C virus in 2009.

Hence, it is crucial that appropriate measures are taken to reduce the burden of disease related to viral hepatitis.

# A silent epidemic

## Get screened and treated

As hepatitis B and C account for the majority of liver-related deaths in this country, the Health Ministry has outlined the National Strategic Plan (NSP) for Hepatitis B & C (2019-2023).

With the current technology in expediting screening and diagnosis of the disease, as well as the availability of effective and affordable treatment, it is not impossible to prevent and treat viral hepatitis, and even cure hepatitis C.

Prof Rosmawati says: "Under the NSP, Malaysia is committed towards eliminating viral hepatitis by 2030 and screening for the disease has never been easier.

"All you need to do is visit your doctor and ask to be screened.

"If you have hepatitis, early detection, diagnosis and treatment can guide you towards preventing the long-term consequences of cirrhosis and liver cancer."

Hepatitis affects over 325 million people across the world.

Globally, 90% of people living with hepatitis B and 80% living with hepatitis C are unaware they have the disease.

Prof Rosmawati notes that: "Eliminating the sharing of needles and personal objects that may contain blood, such as razors, would be the best way to avoid getting infected and having a potentially fatal disease.

"When it comes to sharing these types of items, just say no!



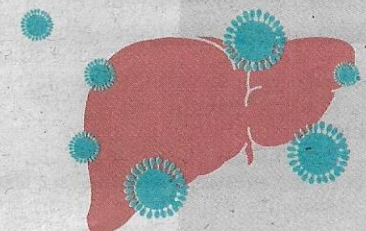

"Avoiding behaviours that can put you at risk would also be beneficial in minimising your exposure to hepatitis.

"Sometimes, sharing is just not a good idea."

While hepatitis A and B may be prevented with vaccinations, screening for hepatitis C will be your best bet to ensure early diagnosis and treatment.

## Types of hepatitis

Here are the most common types of hepatitis viruses in circulation.

|  | HEPATITIS A   | HEPATITIS B  | HEPATITIS C  | HEPATITIS D  | HEPATITIS E  |
|--|---|--|--|--|--|
| <b>Transmission</b><br> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Close personal contact.</li> <li>&gt; Sharing of food or drink.</li> </ul> <p><b>Highly contagious.</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Blood and certain body fluids, but most commonly from an infected mother to her newborn child.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Blood, including the sharing of needles or personal items that contain blood.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Body fluids and blood.</li> </ul> <p><b>Only develops in those already infected by Hepatitis B.</b></p>                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Consuming undercooked meat or shellfish.</li> <li>&gt; Drinking contaminated water.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Symptoms</b><br>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Nausea</li> <li>&gt; Fatigue</li> <li>&gt; Stomach pain</li> <li>&gt; Jaundice</li> </ul>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Fatigue</li> <li>&gt; Poor appetite</li> <li>&gt; Stomach pain</li> <li>&gt; Jaundice</li> </ul> <p><b>Symptoms may only develop later, and some may develop long-term conditions like liver cirrhosis and liver cancer.</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Fever</li> <li>&gt; Vomiting</li> <li>&gt; Fatigue</li> </ul> <p><b>Most people only experience general symptoms.</b></p> <p><b>May develop as acute hepatitis with mild symptoms, or chronic hepatitis, which can progress over time without any symptoms until it becomes liver cirrhosis or liver cancer.</b></p> | <p>Similar to hepatitis B.</p> <p><b>Can lead to liver damage and death.</b></p>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Fever</li> <li>&gt; Nausea</li> <li>&gt; Jaundice</li> <li>&gt; Stomach pain</li> </ul>        |
| <b>Prevention</b><br>  | Vaccine   | Vaccine  | No vaccine   | No vaccine   | Vaccine (but not widely available)   |

TheStar graphics

## Embarrassment and stigma

Some patients have admitted to being ashamed of being diagnosed with hepatitis.

This stigma has also caused patients to refuse screening, or even treatment, due to them feeling embarrassed to have been infected with the disease.

A lack of awareness of the disease and misinformation have led some to believe that people

that being infected with hepatitis does not make them a bad person or someone who deserves to be sick.

"Everyone has a right to healthcare and if you feel you might be at risk, go and get yourself screened.

"You are not only protecting yourself, but also your loved ones."

## Their stories

visit multiple tattoo parlours during his many travels throughout South-East Asia.

With his recovery, Lee has continued living a healthier lifestyle, with a balanced diet, regular exercise and adequate rest.

He feels great and is thankful that he was screened and obtained the required treatment to address his condition.

He now follows-up with Prof Rosmawati once every six months to ensure that his cirrhosis does not worsen or progress to liver cancer.

Meanwhile, Siti Zubaidah was found to have abnormal liver enzymes during a routine blood test.

Her risk factor was that she had received a blood transfusion in 1983 due to childbirth complications.

Following a hepatitis screening, she was diagnosed with hepatitis C.

Her doctor also performed a special liver scan, which showed that she had cirrhosis.

Despite her fear and dread, Siti Zubaidah successfully completed her three months of oral treatment and was successfully cured.

Further testing has shown improvement in her liver scarring, and she continues to see Prof Rosmawati once every six months.

The consultant hepatologist advises people who have one or more risk factors for hepatitis to get screened for their own safety and well-being.

As testing for hepatitis C was not available worldwide until the early 1990s, Prof Rosmawati strongly advises: "Malaysians who have had a blood transfusion prior to 1994 should visit the nearest doctor to be tested for hepatitis C, as there were no screening mechanisms for hepatitis C in blood transfusions before then."

And while the last few years have seen a marked improvement in safety and health hygiene at tat-

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C, early treatment could mean the difference between recovery or progressing to a more chronic level of liver disease, including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

By getting the help you need from your doctor, you may be cured with the right treatment within three to six months.

Lee, who has been diagnosed with hepatitis C when he was 69 years old.

He had no obvious symptoms of a liver-related illness.

Going through a painful personal journey at that time, he was drinking alcohol regularly and heavily.

During routine blood tests overseas, he was found to have abnormal

Lee (who has been diagnosed with hepatitis C when he was 69 years old).

He had no obvious symptoms of a liver-related illness.

Going through a painful personal journey at that time, he was drinking alcohol regularly and heavily.

During routine blood tests overseas, he was found to have abnormal

C, which follow-up tests indicated he had cirrhosis.

This gave Lee the jolt he needed to make lifestyle changes.

After a three-month treatment regime consisting of one tablet per day, tests showed that the hepatitis C virus was no longer present – he had been cured.

He suspects he was infected through tattooing, as he used to

too parlours, especially with their usage of new needles for each customer, she recommends doing research before visiting a tattooist to ensure optimum health standards are in place.

**You can visit [www.whennotsharing-iscaring.com](http://www.whennotsharing-iscaring.com) to learn more about getting tested and treated for hepatitis.**

HUNDREDS of infants and young children worldwide have been struck by acute hepatitis of unknown origin since March.

This illness, which causes a sudden onset of liver inflammation (i.e. hepatitis), has been confirmed in one Malaysian child.

The previously-healthy four-year-old boy from Sabah rapidly deteriorated after his diagnosis in March, and had to undergo a liver transplant at the end of that month.

He was subsequently discharged in good health in April.

Says paediatrician Dr Connie Teo Kai Ru: "The clinical syndrome among identified cases is acute hepatitis with significantly elevated liver enzymes.

"Many of the symptoms that have been reported include gastrointestinal issues such as abdominal pain, diarrhoea and vomiting, as well as increased levels of liver enzymes and jaundice (yellowing of the whites of the eyes).

"Other symptoms of this acute hepatitis include dark urine, pale/grey-coloured faeces, itchy skin, and muscle or joint pain.

"In most cases, the patient did not present with a fever.

"Hence, the common viruses that cause acute viral hepatitis (i.e. hepatitis viruses A, B, C, D and E) have

not been detected in any of these cases."

She notes that due to the unknown source of infection, it is difficult to know what specific precautions to take in preventing the spread of the disease, especially for children who appear to be more susceptible and vulnerable to this disease.

Indeed, oftentimes, patients who have hepatitis do not even realise they are carrying a hepatitis virus.

She says: "Although most cases of hepatitis do not show obvious signs and symptoms, one should see a doctor if they develop a poor appetite, nausea, vomiting or start to get abdominal pain.

"Complications of hepatitis result in liver cirrhosis, which is severe liver damage that causes cell death, or the most harmful consequence is liver cancer."

According to Dr Teo, studies in several countries, including the United Kingdom, which was the first to report such cases in March, suggest that this acute hepatitis in children may be transmitted by a

# Cause in children still unknown



Three-quarters of the acute hepatitis cases of unknown origin have occurred in children less than five years of age. – AFP

mutated adenovirus type 41F.

Based on research by the World Health Organization (WHO), the virus was found to start spreading during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"The adenovirus has been found in 75% of cases tested in the UK, with the majority of cases showing type 41 adenovirus.

"However, many of the remaining cases did not have proper samples taken, highlighting the importance of appropriate sampling

(whole blood) to further characterise the type of adenovirus detected.

"Additionally, type 41 adenovirus infection has not been previously linked to such a clinical presentation in otherwise healthy children," she says.

More thorough research is still being conducted as an adenovirus infection does not explain the more severe cases observed.

Dr Teo adds that it is important to note that the current association identified with the adenovirus could be an incidental finding.

"Adenovirus usually does not cause hepatitis in children, but in such affected children, there may be a co-factor, such as a toxin or previous viral infection.

"The virus also comes in many genetic varieties and can occur at any age in children who will display symptoms typical of respiratory illnesses, such as fever, coughs, colds and sore throats.

"I also read some research from Japan where the adenovirus was found in respiratory droplets or secretions, or via direct contact

with an infected person, stool or contaminated surface," she says.

The mutated adenovirus type 41F can last on environmental surfaces for a long time, making its transmissibility much higher than other viruses, she adds.

"The standard hygiene recommendations, which include good hand hygiene, as well as cleaning and disinfecting surfaces in settings frequented by young children, should always be followed," says Dr Teo.

Additionally, parents should ensure that their children's vaccinations are up to date.

"Vaccination is still a necessity – it has been implemented for so long, especially in preventing hepatitis A and B among children and has proven to be effective.

"We do not deny that this virus can cause significant effects on a patient, but also bear in mind that there are various methods of treatment that can be done," she says.

Parents should be alert and ready to bring their children for consultation or treatment if they show any symptoms.

And as the presentation of hepatitis may not be obvious in the early phase, it is always advisable to return to see the doctor if the child is not better 48 to 72 hours after the initial consultation.