

## Hepatitis E Virus Factsheet for Patients

### What is the hepatitis E virus?

The hepatitis E virus (HEV) is found throughout the world in both humans and animals, especially pigs. There are several different variants of the hepatitis E virus, the one commonly found in the UK is called genotype 3.

HEV can be present in pork products, shellfish and other meat, however the risk to humans is extremely low if these are cooked thoroughly. HEV is not easily passed from person to person, but it can be passed on through blood transfusion.

Most people who become infected with HEV have no symptoms and the infection clears completely within a couple of months. It is thought that as many as 100,000 people in the UK are infected with HEV each year, the majority being caused by a dietary source, but less than 1 in 100 people become unwell as a result.

HEV infection is detected in patients or donors by a blood test.

### Why is HEV important?

HEV may pose a risk of harm to a patient whose immune system cannot clear the infection from the body, and the infection can then become persistent.

If a HEV infection is found in a patient with reduced immunity, levels of the virus in the blood will be monitored and treatment given if required to prevent potential chronic inflammation of the liver.

### What are the symptoms of HEV?

Most people infected with HEV show no symptoms, and therefore be unaware of it.

The first signs of infection in those that do, include one or more of the following:

- Mild flu-like symptoms
- Extreme tiredness, which can continue for some time after clearing the virus
- Urine becomes darker or brown in colour
- Abdominal pain
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Fever or high temperature
- Loss of appetite
- Itching
- Nausea and vomiting
- Aching joints and muscles
- Tingling, numbness and weakness in your arms and legs

### HEV and blood transfusion

A study carried out in 2012/13 showed that approximately 1 in 3000 blood donors in the south of England had HEV infection at the time of donation. Experts have now recommended that some patients who have reduced immunity should receive blood components (i.e. red cells, platelets, fresh frozen plasma, cryoprecipitate and granulocytes) that are tested to ensure the hepatitis E virus is not present. HEV negative blood components may only be needed for a short period of time, usually until the immune system is back to working as normal. If you need blood components that are HEV negative this information should be added to your medical notes.

Not all blood components will be tested for HEV; any component that has been screened by NHS Blood and Transplant and is HEV negative will be labelled 'NEG: HEV'.

All non-UK methylene blue (MB) fresh frozen plasma and cryoprecipitate components are screened for HEV during manufacturing in Austria, and confirmed as HEV negative, but will not be labelled HEV negative.

## What if blood is needed in an emergency?

In an emergency, there may not be enough time to arrange for HEV negative blood components, and it may be more important to give you the transfusion as soon as possible. Your medical team will make this decision. Although HEV negative blood components are recommended for you, if you receive a blood component that is not labelled as HEV negative (which means the component was not tested for HEV) you will be observed closely and any treatment will be given as needed.

## Can HEV be prevented?

There is no vaccine for HEV at the moment. Cooking pork and pork products (especially sausages) thoroughly until juices run clear will help prevent HEV, as will not eating other raw or undercooked meat or shellfish. Making sure you wash your hands after going to the toilet is also important.

## What next?

It is important that you remind your medical team that you need HEV negative blood components as they may have to order them specially for you.

If you have any further questions please ask the healthcare professionals looking after you.

## Additional Information

You may find the following websites useful:

If you are interested in finding out more about Hepatitis E:

[www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/liver-information/liver-conditions/hepatitis-e](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk/liver-information/liver-conditions/hepatitis-e)

If you are interested in finding out more about blood transfusion:

### NHS Choices

[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Blood-transfusion/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Blood-transfusion/Pages/Introduction.aspx)

### NHS Blood and Transplant

[www.nhsbt.nhs.uk/what-we-do/blood-transfusion/](http://www.nhsbt.nhs.uk/what-we-do/blood-transfusion/)

We would welcome your feedback and comments on this factsheet.

You can contact us in the following ways:

#### By post:

Customer Services, NHS Blood and Transplant, Part Academic Block – Level 2,  
John Radcliffe Hospital, Headley Way, Headington, Oxford OX3 9BQ

By email: [NHSBT.customerservice@nhsbt.nhs.uk](mailto:NHSBT.customerservice@nhsbt.nhs.uk)

Or by phone: **01865 381010**

This factsheet was prepared by NHS Blood and Transplant in collaboration with the National Blood Transfusion Committee. Healthcare professionals can download further copies from the Hospitals and Science website at <http://hospital.blood.co.uk/products/hepatitis-e-screening/>

The public can get copies of this factsheet by calling **01865 381010**.

## NHS Blood and Transplant

NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT) saves and improves lives by providing a safe and reliable supply of blood components, organs, stem cells, tissues and related services to the NHS, and other UK health services.

### For more information

Visit [nhsbt.nhs.uk](http://nhsbt.nhs.uk)

Email [enquiries@nhsbt.nhs.uk](mailto:enquiries@nhsbt.nhs.uk)

Call **0300 123 23 23**