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Could You Have Hepatitis and Not Know It? Why Awareness Could Save Your Life

Johannesburg, 27 July 2026 - Every year, millions of people around the world are affected by viral hepatitis, yet many don't realise they are living with the infection. Often referred to as a "silent disease", hepatitis can quietly damage the liver for months or even years before symptoms begin to appear.

Because symptoms often don't appear until the disease has progressed, many people are only diagnosed after significant liver damage has already occurred.

That's why education matters. Knowing the facts, understanding your risk and seeking testing when necessary, could save your life.

Not all Hepatitis is the same

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver, commonly caused by viruses.

There are five main types of viral hepatitis – A, B, C, D and E. While they all affect the liver, they spread in different ways. Hepatitis A and E are usually linked to contaminated food or water and are often short-term illnesses. Hepatitis B and C are the greatest public health concern because they can become chronic infections that silently damage the liver over many years. Hepatitis D only occurs in people who already have hepatitis B.

While each type differs in how it spreads and how it is managed, one thing remains the same: awareness, early testing and prevention can significantly reduce the risk of serious illness.

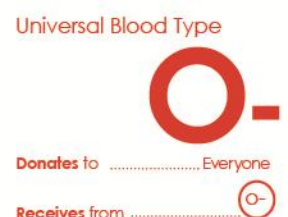
The disease you may never feel

One of the biggest challenges with hepatitis is that many people experience few, if any, symptoms during the early stages of infection.

People can continue going to work, raising families and living seemingly healthy lives while the virus quietly damages the liver.

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When symptoms do appear, they may include:

- Persistent fatigue
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Pain in the upper right side of the abdomen
- Dark-coloured urine
- Pale or clay-coloured stools
- Yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice)

Because some of these symptoms, in the absence of jaundice, are common to many illnesses, hepatitis often goes undiagnosed without testing.

Why knowing your status matters

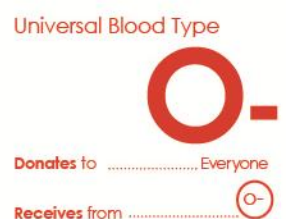
Testing is the only way to know whether you have hepatitis.

Early diagnosis allows people to begin treatment sooner, helps reduce the risk of severe liver disease and prevents unknowingly passing the virus to others.

You should consider speaking to a healthcare provider about hepatitis testing if you:

- Have had unprotected sex with multiple partners.
- Have risk factors associated with injecting drug use or share needles
- Work in healthcare or have regular exposure to blood.
- Live with someone diagnosed with hepatitis B.
- Were born to a mother living with hepatitis B.
- Have unexplained abnormal liver function test results.

Even if you do not have any known risk factors for hepatitis B, all adults should be tested for hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection at least once to determine their HBV immune status and identify any past or current infection. Knowing your HBV status enables informed healthcare decisions, appropriate vaccination where needed, and provides reassurance about your health.



Protecting South Africa's blood supply

For the South African National Blood Service (SANBS), protecting patients starts long before blood reaches a hospital.

Every person who donates blood first completes a confidential health and lifestyle assessment to identify any potential risk factors. Every donated unit is then tested using advanced laboratory technology for transfusion-transmissible infections, including hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV and syphilis.

These multiple layers of screening and testing help ensure that every unit of blood supplied to patients meets the highest safety standards.

Education is the first step towards prevention

Despite advances in prevention, testing and treatment, many people continue to delay seeking help because they feel healthy or simply don't realise they could be at risk.

Improving awareness can help reduce stigma, encourage earlier diagnosis and ensure more people receive the care they need before serious liver damage occurs.

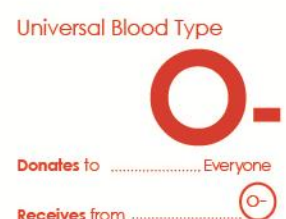
"One of the greatest challenges with viral hepatitis is that many people don't realise they are infected with HBV or HCV because the disease can remain silent for years," says Dr Ute Jentsch, Acting Medical Director at the South African National Blood Service.

"Education is critical in the fight against hepatitis. It empowers people to understand their risk, seek testing when appropriate and make informed decisions about their health. Importantly, it also raises awareness of the hepatitis B vaccine, which is highly effective and can be administered from birth, providing lifelong protection against HBV. Widespread vaccination not only protects individuals but also helps safeguard the health of future generations, including potential blood donors.

By increasing awareness and encouraging early detection, we can reduce the burden of viral hepatitis while safeguarding the health of both future blood donors and the broader community. At SANBS, patient safety begins long before blood reaches a recipient. Through stringent donor selection processes and thorough screening of every blood donation for both HBV and HCV, SANBS helps ensure a safe, reliable and sustainable blood supply for all South Africans."

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Every conversation could save a life

Hepatitis is preventable, detectable and, in many cases, treatable. Yet thousands of people remain unaware they are living with the virus.

Whether you're considering becoming a blood donor, supporting someone living with hepatitis or simply taking charge of your own health, awareness is one of the most powerful tools we have.

When people know the facts, they're more likely to get tested, seek treatment and help prevent the spread of infection.

Knowledge saves lives. So does safe blood.

Stay connected with SANBS on social media:

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- Facebook (@SANBS)
- Instagram (@thesanbs)
- TikTok (@thesanbs)

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ABOUT SANBS

The South African National Blood Service (SANBS) is an independent non-profit organisation and a leader in blood transfusion. SANBS operates in eight of the nine provinces in South Africa (excluding the Western Cape, which is served by the Western Cape Blood Service) and provides crucial support to countries in the SADC region.

The organisation prides itself on being the lifeblood of South Africa's healthcare system, providing over one million world-class blood products annually. This pedigree comes from world-class testing and collection protocols, ensuring a safe supply for patients. SANBS operates a vast network of donor centres, including more than 60 fixed centres and over 100 mobile collection sites daily.

SANBS aims to collect 3,500 units of blood daily to ensure a safe and sufficient supply for South Africa's healthcare system. Regular donations are critical because a unit of blood lasts only 42 days. We encourage donors to commit to giving blood regularly, ensuring a continuous supply for those in need.

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