

Key points

- HHV-8 is a type of herpes virus.
- In very rare cases, it can be passed on from an organ donor to a person having a transplant.
- People who have had a transplant have a higher risk of serious problems caused by the virus.
- It may not be possible to find out before a transplant if a donor had the virus.
- Testing means that anyone who gets the virus after a transplant can have extra tests and monitoring to look for any problems it may cause.
- There is no cure for the virus, but there are ways to treat the problems it can cause.
- If you are on the transplant list, then it is likely that the risk of not having a transplant is much higher than the risk from the virus.

What Is HHV-8?

HHV-8 stands for human herpes virus 8. There are many types of herpes virus, and they are very common. For example, about 8 in 10 people in the UK have a type of herpes virus called Epstein-Barr virus (EBV). Herpes viruses are usually harmless. Sometimes they can cause minor problems such as cold sores.

Most people will get herpes viruses as children or young adults. When you first get the virus, your immune system will make proteins called antibodies to attack it. These antibodies will then stay in your blood, looking out for the virus. But unlike most types of viruses, herpes viruses can stay in your body and hide from these antibodies. This is called “latency”.

When the virus is hiding it cannot cause any problems. But if your immune system is not working properly the virus can come out of hiding.

HHV-8 is the newest herpes virus discovered. It is less common in the UK than other herpes viruses. Only about 1 in 20 people in the UK have HHV-8. There is no treatment that will get rid of HHV-8. But there are ways to treat the problems it can cause.

HHV-8 and liver transplants

After your transplant you will need to take strong medicines to weaken your immune system. These will stop your immune system attacking your new liver. But they will also make it less good at dealing with viruses and other infections.

This means that after a transplant, HHV-8 can come out of hiding, if you already have it. If you get it for the first time through your new liver, there is chance the virus will make you ill. In rare cases the virus can then cause serious problems. This can include damaging your new liver, causing your immune system to become over-active or causing some rare types of cancer called Kaposi’s sarcoma and lymphoma.

If you get HHV-8 from a liver transplant you will have extra tests and monitoring to look for these problems. This will help to find and treat them early. Some people who get HHV-8 from a transplant will never have any problems from it.

Testing for HHV-8

Organ donors and people having transplants have been tested for other types of herpes virus for many years.

Since June 2023, all deceased organ donors in the UK have also been tested for HHV-8. A special test is needed for this. This test is more difficult to perform and takes longer than other herpes virus tests. At the moment the HHV-8 test results come after the transplant has happened. This may change in the future, but we need the correct tests, and we are looking at this.

What are my chances of getting HHV-8 from my transplant?

The new testing programme for HHV-8 has helped us collect data about the virus, how often it is passed on, and how often it causes problems.

Because the virus is quite rare, there have only been a few cases of it being passed on through a liver transplant. This means it is hard to know exactly what the risks are. This will improve over time as more information is collected. The numbers shown here (June 2023 to December 2024) may go up or down in the future.

How likely is it that my liver donor had HHV-8?

Around 1 in 20 deceased donors has HHV-8



How likely is it that I will get HHV-8 from my new liver?

Since HHV-8 testing started in June 2023 there have been about 1,300 liver transplants. From these, 8 people have got HHV-8 from their new liver. That means that for every 160 transplants, 1 person got HHV-8 and 159 people did not.



How likely is it that I will die from HHV-8 picked up from a liver transplant?

Of the 8 people who got HHV-8 from their liver transplant since 2023:

- 5 died from problems caused by HHV-8
- 3 had no symptoms
- 60 people died from other causes

This means about 1 in 260 people who had a liver transplant died from HHV-8.



What happens if I get HHV-8 from my transplant?

If you or your donor are diagnosed with HHV-8 your medical team will take action to reduce the risk of you having serious problems. However, there are currently no proven effective treatments for HHV-8 itself or treatments to prevent its transmission. Treatment is aimed at the illnesses it causes.

You will be monitored very closely. This includes:

- Regular clinic visits
- Blood tests
- Monitoring for symptoms (not just for HHV-8 but for other post-transplant risks)
- Other tests if needed

If you get an HHV-8-related disease, your medical team can change your treatment quickly. This may include:

- Changing your immunosuppressive medicines
- Giving you treatment for the HHV-8 related disease
- Giving you anti-cancer medicines if necessary

How should this affect my decision about a liver transplant?

For any type of medical treatment, you and your medical team should weigh up the risks and benefits. If you are on the liver transplant list, then you are probably very unwell. Without a transplant the risk of becoming even more seriously ill or of dying is likely to be high.

The risk from HHV-8 if you do have a transplant is low. It is also far lower than for some of the other possible complications of having a transplant.

But having a transplant is a big decision. Your medical team will be able to talk to you about all the possible risks and answer all your questions.

Information

This information sheet has been prepared in consultation with physicians from different specialties, who are all involved in liver transplantation, as well as lay and patient representatives, using information collected from the recently introduced deceased donor screening in the UK. Please talk to the transplant team if you want to discuss its contents.

Further Information

The British Liver Trust has further information on their [website](#) including four free-to-order booklets that relate to liver transplantation.