

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (known as HCV). Hepatitis C can cause liver disease that can lead to the need for a liver transplant.

Anyone can get hepatitis C. More than half of people who become infected with hepatitis C virus will develop a chronic (long-lasting) infection.

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

How is Hepatitis C Spread?

The infection is spread:

- by having direct contact with blood or body fluids of an infected person
- by receiving blood, blood products or organs from an infected person
- by using intravenous drugs and sharing needles, syringes or other drug equipment with an infected person or getting a tattoo by a tattoo artist who doesn't follow good health practices
- by sharing personal items that may have the infected person's blood on them (such as razor or toothbrush)
- during childbirth, from a mother to the baby.

Hepatitis C is rarely spread through sexual activity.

Hepatitis C cannot be spread by food and water, casual contact (such as a hug or handshake), breastfeeding, hugging or kissing, or sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses.

Who is at Risk or Who Should be Tested for Hepatitis C?

People at risk for hepatitis C or should be tested are those who:

- are current or former injection drug users, including those who injected only once many years ago
- were treated for blood clotting problems with a blood product made before 1987
- were notified they received blood from a donor who tested positive for hepatitis C
- received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant before July 1992
- are on long-term dialysis
- have symptoms of liver disease
- are health care workers who have contact with human blood
- have HIV infections
- are babies born to HCV-positive women.

What are the Symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Most people newly infected with hepatitis C do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected.

People who have symptoms usually get them 2 to 12 weeks after exposure. Symptoms can include:

- fever
- jaundice (yellow eyes)
- dark urine
- abdominal pain
- fatigue
- appetite loss
- nausea (upset stomach) or vomiting (throwing up)
- clay-colored stool
- joint pain.

Many people who have long-term hepatitis C have no symptoms and feel well.

What are the Side Effects of Hepatitis C?

Long-term side effects of hepatitis C include:

- chronic (long-term) infection
- chronic (long-term) liver disease
- need for a liver transplant.

How is Hepatitis C Found?

There are blood tests your health care provider can use to confirm hepatitis C.

How is Hepatitis C Treated?

Fewer than half of people who are infected with hepatitis C will clear it from their bodies without treatment.

Nine out of 10 people infected can be cured with 8 to 12 weeks of taking medicine by mouth.

Do not drink alcohol, which can make liver disease worse.

How Long can the Hepatitis C Virus be Spread?

The HCV virus can be spread as long as you have the infection, even if no symptoms are present.

How Can You Prevent the Spread of Hepatitis C?

To prevent the spread of hepatitis C:

- Do not use intravenous drugs. If you do and can't stop, do not share needles, syringes, water or any drug equipment.
- Do not share personal items that may have blood on them (toothbrushes or razors).
- Follow routine barrier precautions and safe needle handling (for health care workers).
- Consider the risks of getting tattoos, body piercings or both. Be sure to have either performed by an artist or piercer who follows good health practices.
- Use latex condoms when having sex. (The risk for spreading hepatitis C through sexual contact is rare.)
- Do not donate blood, organs, tissue or sperm if you have or had hepatitis C.

How Long Should Infected People Stay Home From Work or School?

People should not be kept out of work, school, daycare or other places due to HCV infection.

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.