

Hepatitis C Fact Sheet



HEALTH DEPARTMENT
Caring today for a healthy tomorrow

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease. It is caused by the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV).

What are the symptoms?

Most people infected with HCV have no symptoms until late in the illness. When symptoms develop from a new infection, they usually occur six to nine weeks after exposure. Symptoms in acute HCV infection include:

- Yellowing of the eyes and skin
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever
- Loss of appetite or stomach pain
- Abdominal pain in the liver region
- Feeling tired

How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread through infected blood or body fluids. The virus is mainly passed from person to person through direct blood-to-blood contact. It can also be spread by having sex with an infected person, but this is responsible for only a small number of infections. The majority of hepatitis C cases are due to injection drug use.

Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact (coughing, sneezing, or hugging) or by contaminated food or water.

An infected person is capable of transmitting hepatitis C to others as long as the virus is in his blood. For most people, this will be for the rest of their lives.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

A blood test done by your doctor is needed to diagnose hepatitis C.

How is hepatitis C treated?

Antiviral drugs are available to treat some people. Doctors will help decide who should be treated.

Your doctor can explain how to protect the liver by not drinking alcohol and avoiding certain medications. He may also recommend you get shots to prevent you from getting the hepatitis A and hepatitis B viruses.

What are the risk factors for hepatitis C?

Anyone can get hepatitis C, but those at greatest risk include:

- People who have gotten a tattoo or body piercing with contaminated needles
- People who share needles to inject drugs
- Health care workers who receive an accidental injury with a needle or a sharp instrument
- People on long-term hemodialysis
- People who received a blood transfusion or an organ transplant from an infected person before July 1992
- Babies born to mothers with hepatitis C
- People who have unprotected sex with a person who has hepatitis C

Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend the following people be tested for hepatitis C:

Hepatitis C Fact Sheet – page 2

- People who ever injected illegal drugs, including those who injected once or a few times many years ago and do not consider themselves drug users
- People with selected medical conditions including those:
 - On long-term hemodialysis
 - With persistently abnormal liver tests
 - Who received clotting factor concentrates before 1987
- People who received transfusions or organ transplants including those who:
 - Were told they received blood from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis C
 - Received a transfusion of blood or blood products before July 1992
 - Received an organ transplant before July 1992
- Healthcare, emergency medical and public safety workers after needle sticks, sharps or eye or mouth exposures to hepatitis C-positive blood
- Children born to hepatitis C-positive women

Is hepatitis C serious?

Hepatitis C can become a serious illness for some people. Most people who become infected carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Most of these people have some liver damage, but many don't feel sick from it.

Some people may develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver failure. That can take many years to develop. Other people have no long term effects.

How can hepatitis C be prevented?

To prevent hepatitis C:

- Avoid sharing toothbrushes, razors, needles and other personal care items.
- Cover cuts and open sores.
- Always wear latex gloves and wash hands often when handling blood or body fluids.
- A person who has sex with more than one partner or a known Hepatitis C infected person should use latex condoms correctly each and every time.
- A person who uses or injects street drugs should stop. If he or she can't stop, he or she shouldn't reuse or share syringes, water, or drug works.

Should a person with hepatitis C be excluded from work or school?

People with hepatitis C should not be excluded from work or school, childcare or any other setting because of their infection. Infected people should be educated on precautions they should take to reduce the likelihood of exposing others to their blood or body fluids.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about hepatitis C or think you may have it, call your health care provider.