



OFFICE OF POPULATION AFFAIRS

Hepatitis C

THE FACTS



Hepatitis C THE FACTS



What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection that affects the liver. Hepatitis C can begin as an acute infection, a short-term illness that occurs within six months after someone is infected. (Not everyone has symptoms.)



In most cases, hepatitis C remains in the body and becomes a long-term or chronic infection. This occurs in about 75%- 80% of those infected.



How do people get Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C virus is transmitted through direct contact with blood from an infected person. The virus is most commonly transmitted through sharing of needles and syringes by injection drug users. Healthcare workers are at risk through needle sticks, as are babies born to mothers with hepatitis C.

Less commonly, hepatitis C is transmitted through sexual contact with an infected partner, or by sharing household objects such as razors and toothbrushes with someone infected with Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is not spread through sharing cups and utensils, or through hugging, shaking hands, or breastfeeding.

How common is Hepatitis C?

An estimated 3.2 million people in the United States are living with chronic hepatitis C infection, and most don't feel ill or know they are infected, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).



There are approximately 17,000 new hepatitis C cases each year in the U.S., many of which go unreported since people often don't have symptoms and aren't diagnosed.



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What are the symptoms?

About 75% of those with hepatitis C have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can develop within a few weeks up to about six months (the average is six weeks) and might include:



- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Joint pain (arthritis)
- Loss of appetite
- Fever

What are the symptoms of chronic Hepatitis C?

Most people with chronic hepatitis C don't have symptoms. Even without symptoms, though, people with chronic hepatitis C are at risk for serious liver diseases such as cancer, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), or liver failure, all of which can be fatal (but may not show signs for years). Chronic hepatitis C infection is the leading cause of liver transplants in the U.S.



Testing/Diagnosis

There are several blood tests available to detect the hepatitis C virus (HCV). These may be done as a single test or as a combination of tests. One of the tests, the anti-HCV screening test, requires a follow-up test to confirm a positive result.



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Who should be tested for Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C testing is recommended for anyone at increased risk for hepatitis C, including:

- Persons born from 1945 through 1965
- Persons who have ever injected illegal drugs, including those who injected only once many years ago
- Recipients of clotting factor concentrates made before 1987
- Recipients of blood transfusions or solid organ transplants before July 1992
- Patients who have ever received long-term hemodialysis treatment
- Persons with known exposures to hepatitis C
- All persons with HIV infection
- Patients with signs or symptoms of liver disease (e.g., abnormal liver enzyme tests)
- Children born to mothers who are hepatitis C positive



What is the treatment for acute Hepatitis C?

Acute hepatitis C is typically an infection of short duration. If diagnosed, antiviral medication can be used to treat an acute infection. Healthcare providers often recommend getting rest, drinking plenty of fluids, and eating a healthy diet.

What is the treatment for chronic Hepatitis C?

Anyone with chronic hepatitis C should be referred to a healthcare professional with experience in treating hepatitis and liver diseases. There are several medications available to treat chronic hepatitis C but not every case requires treatment. It's important that patients with chronic hepatitis C be evaluated often for liver diseases.

A person with hepatitis C should avoid alcohol and should check with his/her healthcare provider before taking any supplements or over-the-counter medications as some of these products can damage the liver.



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Reduce your risk

There is no vaccine against hepatitis C, but there are ways to make infection with the virus much less likely:



- Injection drug users should never share syringes, needles, or other equipment.
- Avoid sharing objects that might contain blood, such as razors and toothbrushes from a person infected with Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is not commonly spread through sexual contact.

Note: People with hepatitis C should not donate blood or organs.

Sources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- [Hepatitis C FAQs for the Public](#)
- [2012 Testing Recommendation for Chronic Hepatitis C Virus Infection](#)

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

- [Hepatitis C Information](#)

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Content last reviewed: 5/31/12 | Content last updated: 10/19/2012



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