

## Hepatitis C

### What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. When the inflammation is caused by infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV), the disease is called hepatitis C. Hepatitis C can be either acute (short-term) or chronic (long-term). Approximately 75-85% of people who become infected with HCV develop chronic infection.

### Who gets hepatitis C?

The risk of hepatitis C is higher in anyone who has ever injected drugs, people who had a blood transfusion before 1992, healthcare workers with a blood exposure (e.g., by an accidental needle stick), children born to mothers with HCV infection, long-term dialysis patients, and persons with HIV infection.

### How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV lives in the blood. Hepatitis C is spread when blood of someone with hepatitis C enters the body of another person. This can happen when people who inject drugs share needles, syringes, or other equipment with each other or when a healthcare worker accidentally gets stuck with a needle from a patient who has HCV in the blood. HCV can also be transmitted to the baby of an infected mother during delivery; it is not spread by breastfeeding. The risk of hepatitis C from sexual contact is believed to be low, but this risk is increased for those who have multiple sex partners, have a sexually transmitted disease, engage in rough sex, or are infected with HIV. HCV is not spread by sneezing, hugging, coughing, food or water, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or casual contact.

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people do not have any symptoms at all. When illness occurs, it can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness. Symptoms might include fever, fatigue, yellow-colored skin (jaundice), dark urine, and light colored stools. Chronic hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer, or even death. It is the leading cause of cirrhosis and liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplants in the United States. Approximately 15,000 people die every year from hepatitis C-related liver disease.

### How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

With acute hepatitis C, symptoms can appear between two weeks and six months after exposure, although the average onset of symptoms is six to seven weeks after exposure. The effects and symptoms of chronic hepatitis C can take years or decades to appear.

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### How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Several different blood tests are used to test for hepatitis C. A doctor may order just one or a combination of these tests. Typically, a person will first get a screening test that will show whether he or she has developed antibodies to the hepatitis C virus. (An antibody is a substance found in the blood that the body produces in response to a virus.) Having a positive antibody test means that a person was exposed to the virus at some time in his or her life. If the antibody test is positive, a doctor will most likely order a second test to confirm whether the virus is still present in the person's bloodstream.

### What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

For acute hepatitis C, doctors recommend resting and drinking plenty of fluid. People with chronic hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease and evaluated for treatment. The treatment most often used for hepatitis C is a combination of two or more medicines, given over several months. Not every person with chronic hepatitis C needs or will benefit from treatment. In addition, the drugs may cause serious side effects in some patients. Persons with hepatitis C should be vaccinated to prevent hepatitis A and hepatitis B. They should also avoid alcohol or medications or supplements that can damage the liver.

### How can HCV be prevented?

Unlike for hepatitis A and hepatitis B viruses, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C. Therefore, it is especially important to take precautions to prevent exposure to HCV, including:

- Avoid contact with blood (wear gloves when touching blood and clean up spilled blood with bleach).
- Do not share needles or other equipment used for injecting drugs.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, or glucose monitors that might have come into contact with another person's blood.
- Do not get a tattoo or body piercing from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting.
- Do not have unprotected sex.
- If you are infected with HCV, do not donate blood.

### How can I get more information about hepatitis C?

- 1) If you have concerns about hepatitis C, contact your healthcare provider.
- 2) Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/index.htm>.
- 3) Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/C/index.htm>.