

### 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 will develop a chronic infection. Hepatitis C 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.

### Who gets hepatitis C?

The risk of getting hepatitis C is higher for some people, including the following:

- Anyone who has ever injected drugs.
- Those born from 1945–1965.
- People who received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant before 1992.
- Dialysis patients.
- Healthcare workers with a blood exposure (e.g., by an accidental needle stick).
- People with HIV infection.
- Children born to mothers with hepatitis C.
- People who are incarcerated.
- People who use intranasal drugs.
- People who received body piercings or tattoos that involved non-sterile instruments.

### How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV lives in the blood and is spread when the blood of someone with HCV enters the body of someone who is not infected. This can happen when people who inject drugs share needles, syringes, or other equipment with each other or when a healthcare worker is accidentally stuck with a needle containing blood from a patient with hepatitis C. 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. Less commonly, HCV can be spread from person to person by sharing personal items, such as razors and toothbrushes, or getting a body piercing or tattoo in an unregulated setting. HCV is not spread by hugging, coughing, sneezing, food or water, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or casual contact.

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people with hepatitis C do not have any symptoms or have mild symptoms. If symptoms occur, they can include fever, fatigue, yellow color in the skin or eyes (jaundice), dark urine, light or clay-colored stools, abdominal pain including nausea or vomiting, or loss of appetite. 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.

### **How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?**

If symptoms of acute hepatitis C occur, they usually appear 6–7 weeks after exposure, with a range of 2–12 weeks after exposure. If symptoms of chronic hepatitis C occur, it can take decades before they appear.

### **How is hepatitis C diagnosed?**

Several different blood tests are used to test for hepatitis C. A doctor might 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 HCV. 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 might 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, medications, or supplements that can damage the liver.

### **How can hepatitis C be prevented?**

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

- 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?**

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

# Hepatitis C Fact Sheet

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