



We educate the general public about hepatitis C and provide resources and support for those affected by the virus.

Hepatitis C Fact Sheet

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). The virus causes the liver to form tiny scars, which, over time, join together and begin to prevent blood from flowing freely through the liver.

Why is the liver important?

Just as you can't live without a heart or brain, you can't live without a liver. Your liver transforms food into energy, sends nourishment through the blood to cells, stores nutrients, fats, and vitamins, and makes proteins needed to help blood clot. Your liver also acts as a filter to clean wastes and poisons, like alcohol, drugs, caffeine, preservatives, etc. from the blood.

How serious is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is serious for some people but others may have no long-term effects. Most people who get hepatitis C carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Some people with liver damage due to hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis, liver cancer or liver failure, which may take many years to develop. Hepatitis C is the leading cause of liver transplants.

How do you get hepatitis C?

The hepatitis C virus is present in the blood and is spread when infected blood from one person enters the body of another. The sharing of needles and drug paraphernalia while injecting drugs is the most common risk factor. Many people who have been infected with HIV (AIDS) are also infected with HCV. You are also at risk if you have received a blood transfusion or organ transplant prior to 1992, blood-clotting products prior to 1987 or long-term hemodialysis. Healthcare workers exposed to accidental needle sticks and children born to hepatitis C positive mothers can also become infected. Sexual transmission of hepatitis C does occur, but it is not easily spread in this manner. The risk of sexual transmission increases if you have had multiple sex partners.

Hepatitis C is **NOT spread** through casual contact or by swimming pools, toilets and water fountains. It is **NOT spread** by coughing, sneezing, hugging or sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses or through breastfeeding.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Many persons with hepatitis C have no symptoms at all but some will notice mild to severe symptoms such as: "Flu-like" symptoms, abdominal discomfort, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, weight loss, and sometimes yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice).

How soon do symptoms appear?

If symptoms appear, it can be anywhere from 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure, with an average of 6-9 weeks. Some infected people will never have symptoms.

Why should I be tested for hepatitis C?

Early diagnosis is important so that you can be checked for liver damage and receive treatment if you need it. Treatment is most effective **before** severe liver damage has occurred. You can also learn how you can protect your liver from further harm and how you can prevent the spread of HCV to other people. If you think you may have been exposed to the virus or have signs or symptoms of liver disease such as an abnormal liver enzyme test, you should talk to your doctor about getting tested.

What blood tests will I need to have done to diagnose hepatitis C?

Your doctor can tell if you're infected with the hepatitis C virus by performing blood tests that look at several different things such as:

Liver enzymes: When the liver is being attacked and cells are being destroyed, liver enzymes become elevated and a blood test called ALT can measure this. The next step is to determine if a hepatitis virus is what is causing the increased enzyme levels.

Antibodies: Doctors use the ELISA and RIBA tests to detect the presence of antibodies that the body produces against the hepatitis C virus. If this test is positive, it means you have been exposed to the virus but does not tell if you still have the virus.

Viral load: These tests can tell whether the virus is present and how much is in your blood.

What if I test positive for hepatitis C?

Your doctor will discuss your options for treatment. Interferon-based therapy is the current treatment and although treatment does not eliminate the virus in everyone, it can still be helpful to the liver. A healthy diet, lifestyle, and exercise program will help you feel better. You should stop using alcohol and do not start any new medicines or use over-the-counter herbal or other products without a doctor's ok. You may need to get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B and you must learn how to prevent spreading the virus to others.

How can I protect myself from getting hepatitis C?

Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after blood exposure. Wash blood- contaminated surfaces with soap and water and then disinfect with a bleach and water solution (1 part bleach to 10 parts water). Healthcare professionals should always follow routine barrier precautions and safely handle needles and other sharps. Injection drug users should make sure that needles, syringes and works are sterile and never shared. Never draw drugs out of a supply that has been mixed in a shared and possibly contaminated container. When getting a tattoo or body piercing, make sure the artist uses sterile needles, tools and ink and follows good health practices. Practice safer sex by using latex condoms. Do not share personal items that may have your blood on them such as razors, nail files and toothbrushes.

Where can I get more information?

There is a great deal of information and support available to help you understand the disease and how to live with it. Here are some resources to get you started:

Hep C Connection: 1-800-522-HEPC (4372) or visit the web site at www.hepc-connection.org. Hep C Connection is a hepatitis C information, support and awareness resource for people with HCV and their families.

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Viral Hepatitis Program: (303) 692-2780.

Center for Disease Control and Prevention hepatitis web site at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis or call their information line at 1-888-4HEPCDC.