

Hepatitis C

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What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is any kind of inflammation (a reaction which can include swelling and pain) of the liver. Hepatitis has many causes, including viruses (type of germ), drugs, chemicals and alcohol, and even one's own immune system attacking the liver. At this time, there are five viruses known to affect the liver in particular. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. These viruses are very different from one another, but all are infectious and may cause similar symptoms. They differ in how they are spread, how long the infection lasts, and how they are treated. A healthcare provider can test a person's blood for infection with hepatitis A, B and C virus.

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus. Most people who get the infection will go on to have chronic (long-term) infection and can pass it on to others (be a carrier). Some of these people will develop liver damage, with possible complications such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer, and will feel very sick, while others may remain healthy for many years. Many people infected decades ago (such as those born between 1945 and 1965) may be infected and not know it. There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.

How is it spread?

The hepatitis C virus is spread by direct contact with blood (or body fluids containing blood) of an infected person. This can happen through:

- Sharing equipment used to inject drugs
- Blood transfusions and organ transplants prior to 1992 when widespread screening of the blood supply began
- Pregnant women infected with the virus passing it to their babies at birth.
- Sharing personal items, such as a toothbrushes, nail clippers, or razors that have blood on it
- Getting tattoos or body piercings in informal settings or with non-sterile equipment
- Poor infection control in health care facilities and residential care facilities
- Sexual transmission is possible, although rare. Things that increase sexual transmission of hepatitis C include: having a sexually transmitted disease or HIV infection, sex with multiple partners, or rough sex

The hepatitis C virus is NOT spread by casual contact, such as hugging, or through sneezing, coughing, or sharing food and drinks.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Many adults have few or no symptoms. When symptoms occur, they can include tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, stomach ache, and muscle or joint pain. Urine may become darker in color, and then jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) may appear. Years later, cirrhosis may occur in some who are infected, when scar tissue replaces healthy liver cells.



How soon do symptoms appear?

When first infected with hepatitis C virus, most people have no symptoms at all, or may have only mild symptoms. For those who do develop symptoms, the symptoms usually appear between six weeks to six months after infection. Many people with chronic hepatitis C infection do not develop symptoms until years, sometimes even decades, later. The longer people live with hepatitis C infection, the more likely they are to develop serious, life-threatening liver disease.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Hepatitis C is diagnosed with blood tests.

Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

- All people born between 1945 and 1965
- Anyone who has ever injected drugs, even if once or many years ago
- People with HIV infection
- People who had a blood transfusion or organ transplantation before 1992
- People who have been exposed to blood on the job through a needlestick or other injury
- People receiving hemodialysis
- People who have abnormal liver tests or liver disease

How is hepatitis C treated?

Hepatitis C infection can be treated with special drugs that eliminate the virus from the body (cure infection) and prevent liver damage, cirrhosis, and liver cancer. People with hepatitis C should avoid drinking alcohol or taking any medications or dietary supplements that may be harmful to the liver. Hepatitis A and B vaccine may also be recommended. Ask your doctor about treatment options and steps you can take to protect your liver from damage.

How can I prevent hepatitis C?

Since there is no vaccine for hepatitis C, the best way to prevent hepatitis C infection is to avoid contact with the blood of infected people. This includes:

- If you shoot drugs, never share works with anyone. This includes all drug injection equipment that can get blood on or in it (needles, cottons, cookers, ties, water, etc.). Sterile syringes can be purchased over the counter in most pharmacies in Massachusetts by anyone 18 years of age or older. Find out about drug treatment programs that can help you stop using drugs.
- Only get tattoos or body piercings at places using sterile equipment and supplies.
- Never share razors, toothbrushes, or nail clippers
- The risk of sexual transmission is low, but use of latex condoms during vaginal or anal sex will reduce the risk even more

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or health care clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis>
- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under “government”)
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free in Massachusetts at (888) 658-2850

