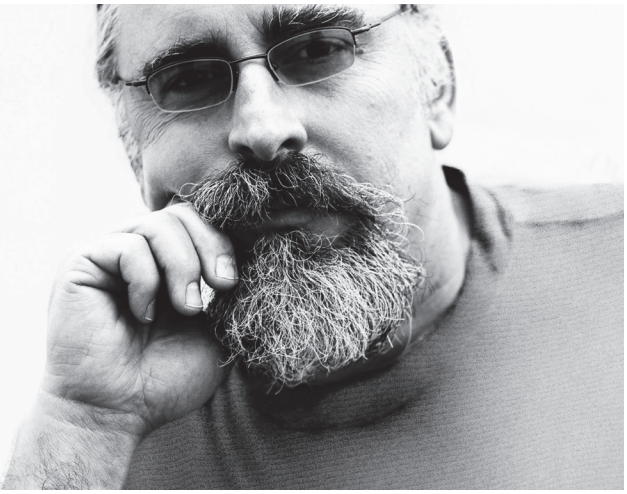
HEPATITIS C

General Information



Can hepatitis C be prevented?

Yes. To reduce the risk of becoming infected with the hepatitis C virus:

- Do not share needles or other equipment to inject drugs, steroids, or cosmetic substances
- Do not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood, such as razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, or glucose monitors
- Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?

Although there is currently no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C, research is being conducted to develop one. Vaccines are available for hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

What is hepatitis?

"Hepatitis" means inflammation of the liver. Heavy alcohol use, toxins, certain medications, some diseases, and viral infections can cause hepatitis. Hepatitis is most often caused by one of several viruses, such as hepatitis A virus, hepatitis B virus, or hepatitis C virus.

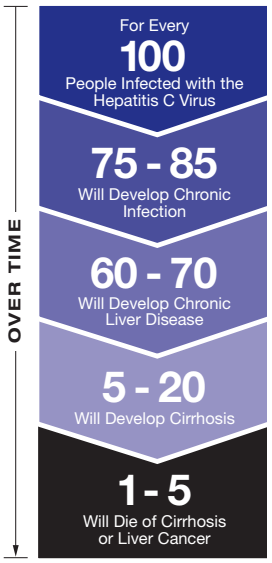
What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the hepatitis C virus. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness that damages the liver. Hepatitis C can be either "acute" or "chronic".

Acute hepatitis C virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Approximately 75%-85% of people who become infected with the hepatitis C virus develop chronic infection. For reasons that are not known, 15-25% of people "clear" the virus without treatment and do not develop chronic infection.

Chronic hepatitis C virus infection is a long-term illness that occurs when the hepatitis C virus remains in a person's body. Chronic infection can last a lifetime. Over time, it can lead to serious liver problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver failure, or liver cancer (see chart).

Progression of Hepatitis C



How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is usually spread when blood from a person infected with the hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. Today, most people become infected with the hepatitis C virus by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992, hepatitis was also commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Although rare, outbreaks of hepatitis C have occurred from blood contamination in medical settings.

Can hepatitis C be spread through sex?

Yes, although scientists do not know how frequently this occurs. Rough sex, sex with multiple partners, or having a sexually transmitted disease or HIV appears to increase a person's risk of hepatitis C. There also appears to be an increased risk for sexual transmission of hepatitis C among gay men who are HIV positive.

Can a person get hepatitis C from a tattoo or piercing?

There is little evidence that hepatitis C is spread by getting tattoos in licensed, commercial facilities. Whenever tattoos or body piercings are performed in informal settings or with non-sterile instruments, transmission of hepatitis C and other infectious diseases is possible.

Does hepatitis C cause symptoms?

Most people with hepatitis C have no symptoms. If symptoms develop with acute infection, they can appear 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure and can include: fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, clay colored bowel movements, joint pain, and jaundice. For people with chronic hepatitis C, symptoms may take years to develop. They can be similar to acute infection and can also be a sign of advanced liver disease.

Who should get tested for hepatitis C?

People at risk include those who:

- Currently inject drugs
- Injected drugs in the past, even if it was once or many years ago
- Have HIV or AIDS
- Have abnormal liver tests or liver disease
- Received donated blood or organs before 1992
- Have been exposed to blood on the job through a needlestick or injury with a sharp object
- Are getting long term hemodialysis

How common is hepatitis C?

An estimated 3.2 million people in the United States have chronic hepatitis C, and many are unaware of their infection. Each year, about 17,000 Americans become infected with hepatitis C.

How serious is chronic hepatitis C?

Chronic hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, and liver cancer. Approximately 8,000–10,000 people die every year from hepatitis C-related liver disease.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose both acute and chronic infection using one or more blood tests. Typically, a person first gets a screening test that looks for "antibodies" to the hepatitis C virus. Antibodies are chemicals released into the bloodstream when a person becomes infected. They remain in the bloodstream, even if the person clears the virus. If the screening test is positive for hepatitis C antibodies, different blood tests are needed to determine whether the infection has been cleared or has become a chronic infection.

How is hepatitis C treated?

Acute hepatitis C rarely causes symptoms and often goes undiagnosed. When it is diagnosed, doctors recommend rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and antiviral medications. People with chronic hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease. Even though a person may not have symptoms or feel sick, damage to the liver can still occur. Antiviral medication can be used to treat some people with chronic hepatitis C, although not everyone needs or can benefit from treatment. For many, treatment can be successful and results in the virus no longer being detected.

What can people infected with hepatitis C do to take care of their liver?

People with chronic hepatitis C virus infection should see a doctor regularly. They also should ask their health professional before taking any prescription pills or over-the-counter medications—including herbal supplements or vitamins—as they can potentially damage the liver. People with chronic infection should also avoid alcohol since it can accelerate liver damage.

For more information

Talk to your health professional, call your health department, or visit www.cdc.gov/hepatitis

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
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