

Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver caused by hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C virus can lead to chronic viral hepatitis, including liver damage, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), and liver cancer.

Hepatitis C


How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is mostly spread by blood from an infected person from:

- ▶ Sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs.
- ▶ Needle sticks with unclean needles.
- ▶ Sharing items that may have come in contact with blood, such as razors, nail clippers, pierced earrings and toothbrushes.
- ▶ Being tattooed or pierced with uncleaned tools that were used on an infected person.
- ▶ Having sexual contact with a person who has the hepatitis C virus. The risk of getting it from sexual contact is thought to be low.

Hepatitis C is rarely spread from a blood transfusion because:

- ▶ Hepatitis C tests are done on all donated blood since 1992.
- ▶ There is no risk of getting hepatitis C when donating blood.



Hepatitis C is not spread by kissing, hugging, coughing, or sharing food and eating utensils.

Who is at risk of hepatitis C?

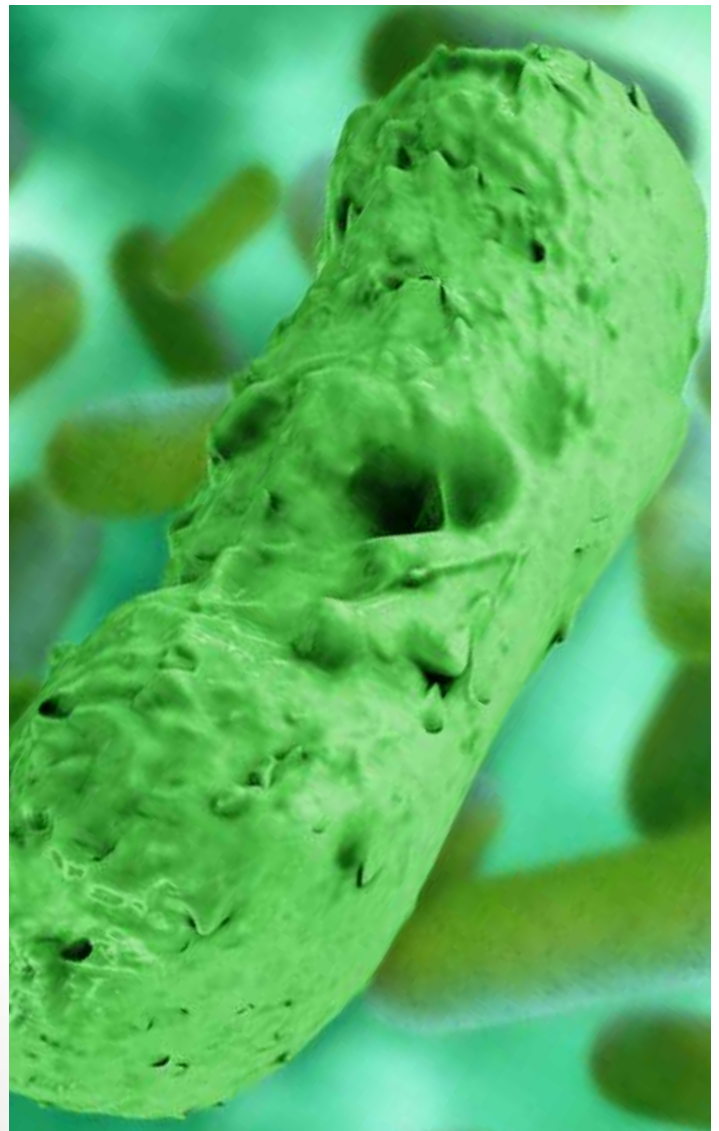
Anyone can get hepatitis C. Those at high risk should be tested and treated. In the U.S., you are at a higher risk if you:

- ▶ Were born between 1945 and 1965.
- ▶ Have ever used a needle to inject drugs, even if once and long ago.
- ▶ Had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992.
- ▶ Have ever been on kidney dialysis.
- ▶ Were born of a mother who had hepatitis C at the time.
- ▶ Are a Vietnam-era Veteran.
- ▶ Had contact with hepatitis-C-positive blood to non-intact skin or to mucous membranes.
- ▶ Received tattoos or body piercings in non-regulated settings.
- ▶ Have ever snorted drugs or shared equipment.
- ▶ Have liver disease.
- ▶ Have abnormal liver tests.
- ▶ Have a history of alcohol abuse.
- ▶ Have hemophilia and received medicine for blood clotting before 1987.
- ▶ Have had a sexual partner with hepatitis C, now or in the past.
- ▶ Have had 10 or more lifetime sexual partners.
- ▶ Have HIV.

The only way to know if you have Hepatitis C is to be tested. See your health care provider.

What are signs of hepatitis C?

When you first get hepatitis C, it is called **acute** hepatitis C. About 15% of people who have acute hepatitis C infection clear the virus from their bodies. The other 85% of people develop a **chronic** (lifelong) hepatitis C infection. New medications to treat hepatitis C have a very high cure rate.



Hepatitis Virus

Acute hepatitis C: Most people with acute hepatitis C do not show signs. If signs occur, the average time is 6–7 weeks after exposure, but can be less or more. Some people can have mild to severe signs like:

- ▶ Yellow skin or eyes (jaundice).
- ▶ Tiredness.
- ▶ Fever.
- ▶ Nausea.
- ▶ Vomiting.
- ▶ Loss of appetite.
- ▶ Stomach pain.
- ▶ Light stools.
- ▶ Dark urine.

Chronic hepatitis C: Millions of people in the United States have chronic hepatitis C infection. Most do not know they are infected. They don't look or feel sick until the virus causes liver damage. This can take 10 years or more to happen. Signs may be the same as acute hepatitis C. There may also be signs of liver damage and cirrhosis such as:

- ▶ Weakness.
- ▶ Weight loss.
- ▶ Small, red, spider-like blood vessels on the skin.
- ▶ Confusion or problems thinking.
- ▶ Loss of interest in sex.
- ▶ Swollen stomach or ankles.
- ▶ A longer than normal amount of time for bleeding to stop.

How do you know if you have hepatitis C?

The only way to know if you have hepatitis C is by a medical exam. Blood tests can tell you:

- ▶ If it is acute or chronic infection.
- ▶ If you have recovered from infection.
- ▶ If you could benefit from vaccination for hepatitis A and B.

In some cases, your health care provider (HCP) may take a liver **biopsy**. A needle is used to remove a tiny piece of liver. This will help to know the degree of liver damage.

How is it treated?

Chronic Hepatitis C is curable. If you have chronic hepatitis C infection, your HCP will examine you for liver problems. Talk to your HCP about treatment that can:

- ▶ Clear the virus from the body.
- ▶ Slow down or prevent liver damage.
- ▶ Lower the chance of getting cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Talk with your HCP about all options before treatment. Treatment may not be for everyone. Some patients might not need it. Others might not be able to be treated due to other medical problems.

What can happen if hepatitis C is not treated?

Of every 100 persons infected with HCV, approximately:

- ▶ 75–85 will go on to develop chronic infection.
- ▶ 60–70 will go on to develop chronic liver disease.
- ▶ 5–20 will go on to develop cirrhosis over a period of 20–30 years.



1–5 will die from the consequences of chronic infection (liver cancer or cirrhosis). Chronic hepatitis C infection is the leading cause of liver cancer and cirrhosis in the U.S. Cirrhosis is scarring of the liver which causes it to not work well. Both liver cancer and cirrhosis can be fatal. A liver transplant may be needed if chronic hepatitis C causes the liver to fail.

If you have hepatitis C:

- ▶ See your HCP regularly.
- ▶ Tell current and recent sex partners.
- ▶ Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.
- ▶ Get plenty of rest.
- ▶ Eat healthy foods.
- ▶ Drink plenty of fluids.

- ▶ Avoid drinking **any** alcohol. There are ways to help you stop drinking alcohol at: www.hepatitis.va.gov/patient/alcohol/what-you-can-do.asp or <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/res-vatreatmentprograms.asp>.
- ▶ Check with your HCP before taking:
 - Prescription drugs.
 - Vitamins and supplements.
 - Over-the-counter drugs.
- ▶ Avoid spreading hepatitis C to others by:
 - Having safer sex and using condoms during all sexual contact.
 - Not sharing used or unclean needles and sex toys.
 - Not donating blood, blood products, or organs.
 - Cleaning all blood spills – even those that have already dried. Use a mixture of bleach and water (one part household bleach to 10 parts water). Even dried blood is a risk to others.
 - Not sharing personal care items like razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers or earrings.
 - Not sharing glucose-monitoring equipment.
 - Asking your sexual partner(s) to be tested for hepatitis C (and perhaps other infections).

If you have hepatitis C, you can prevent liver damage by not drinking alcohol. Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B.

How can you avoid hepatitis C?

Right now there is no vaccine to protect you against hepatitis C. You can take steps to protect yourself:

- ▶ Never share needles, syringes, water, or “works” for intravenous drug use, to inject steroids, or cosmetic substances.
- ▶ Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B if you use drugs.
- ▶ Consider VA substance use and recovery services if you use drugs.
- ▶ Handle needles and other sharp objects safely.
- ▶ Do not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood.
- ▶ Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting.
- ▶ Wear gloves if you have to touch another person's blood. Always clean hands after removing gloves.
- ▶ Have safer sex. Each time you have sex use a condom.



For more information, see *Safer Sex* on page 71

Learn more:

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):

Hepatitis C Basics

www.hepatitis.va.gov/patient/basics/hepatitisC-index.asp

Hepatitis C medications: A review and update for patients

www.hepatitis.va.gov/products/patient/treatment-update.asp

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID/NIH):

Hepatitis C

www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/hepatitis/hepatitisC/Pages/Default.aspx

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

Hepatitis C Information for the Public

www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/C/

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK/NIH):

What I need to know about Hepatitis C

digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hepc_ez/