

Public Health Fact Sheet

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV is spread by contact with the blood of an infected person.

How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood from a person infected with 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 1992, when widespread screening of the blood supply began in the United States, hepatitis C was also commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants.

People can become infected with the hepatitis C virus during such activities as

- Sharing needles, syringes, or other equipment to inject drugs
- Needlestick injuries in health care settings
- Being born to a mother who has hepatitis C

Less commonly, a person can also get hepatitis C virus infection through

- Sharing personal care items that may have come in contact with another person's blood, such as razors or toothbrushes
- Having sexual contact with a person infected with the hepatitis C virus

Who is at risk for hepatitis C?

Some people are at increased risk for hepatitis C, including

- Current injection drug users (currently the most common way hepatitis C virus is spread in the United States)
- Past injection drug users, including those who injected only one time or many years ago
- Recipients of donated blood, blood products, and organs (once a common means of transmission but now rare in the United States since blood screening became available in 1992)
- People who received a blood product for clotting problems made before 1987
- Hemodialysis patients or persons who spent many years on dialysis for kidney failure
- People who received body piercing or tattoos done with non-sterile instruments
- People with known exposures to the hepatitis C virus, such as
 - Health care workers injured by needlesticks
 - Recipients of blood or organs from a donor who tested positive for the hepatitis C virus
- HIV-infected persons
- Children born to mothers infected with the hepatitis C virus

Less common risks include:

- Having sexual contact with a person who is infected with the hepatitis C virus
- Sharing personal care items, such as razors or toothbrushes, that may have come in contact with the blood of an infected person

This fact sheet is for information only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have an infection, consult with your healthcare provider. This fact sheet is based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Health and Safety topic fact sheets.

Testing for hepatitis C is recommended for certain groups, including people who:

- Currently inject drugs
- Injected drugs in the past, even if it was just once or occurred many years ago
- Have HIV infection
- 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 on hemodialysis

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Symptoms of acute hepatitis C can include jaundice (yellowing of the skin), fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, low-grade fever, pale stools, dark urine, and generalized itching. It is important to remember, however, up to 80% of people who are infected with hepatitis C do not exhibit any symptoms and may not know they have it. If a person is exposed to HCV, symptoms may appear about 6 to 8 weeks later, but this time period might vary from person to person. Most HCV infected people carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Approximately 60-70% of chronically infected persons develop liver disease.

How serious is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C infection can be very serious. Most people that become infected will carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Some will develop liver damage and feel sick while others may feel healthy for years after being diagnosed. In some people, the virus may cause cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and/or liver cancer.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?

Persons with hepatitis C should discuss treatment options with a doctor who specializes in treating hepatitis. The treatment most often used for hepatitis C is a combination of two medicines, interferon and ribavirin. However, not all persons with hepatitis C needs or will benefit from treatment. It is recommended that persons infected with hepatitis C be vaccinated for both hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

Can hepatitis C be prevented?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. The best way to keep from getting infected is to avoid any contact with blood. This includes not sharing needles, razors, or toothbrushes. It can be spread by sex, but this does not occur very often. Latex condoms should be used correctly and every time if you are having sex that is not with one steady partner. The efficacy of latex condoms in preventing infection with HCV is unknown, but their proper use may reduce transmission of HCV and does reduce the transmission of other sexually transmitted diseases.

Should patients with HCV change their practices if they have only one long-term steady sex partner?

There is a very low chance of spreading HCV to that partner through sexual activity. To lower the small chance, you may decide to use latex condoms. Ask your doctor about having your sex partner tested.

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To prevent the spread of hepatitis C:

- If you shoot drugs, never share works with anyone. Don't share cocaine or other snorting straws, since these can get blood on them too. Find out about treatment programs that can help you stop using drugs.
- Use a latex condom every time you have sex.
- Only get tattoos or body piercing from places using sterile equipment and fresh ink for each customer.
- Health care workers and people who clean in places where needles or sharps are used should follow standard (universal) precautions.

What about other kinds of hepatitis?

There are several different kinds of hepatitis viruses. If you have had one type, you can still get any of the others. The hepatitis A virus is spread by feces (stool) through close personal contact or contaminated food and water. The hepatitis B virus is spread through blood and body fluids, like semen. There are vaccines to protect you from hepatitis A and B infections. If you have hepatitis C, ask your doctor about being vaccinated for hepatitis A and B.

What can persons with HCV infection do to protect their liver?

- Stop using alcohol.
- See your doctor regularly.
- Don't start any new medicines or use over-the-counter, herbal, and other medicines without a physician's knowledge.
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

What other information should patients with hepatitis C be aware of?

- HCV is not spread by sneezing, hugging, coughing, food or water, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or casual contact.
- Persons should not be excluded from work, school, play, child-care or other settings on the basis of their HCV infection status.
- Involvement with a support group may help patients cope with hepatitis C.

Where can I get more information?

- Your Local Health Department
- Kansas Department of Health and Environment, (877) 427-7317
- www.cdc.gov/hepatitis
- Your doctor, nurse, or local health center

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