

Hepatitis C Virus

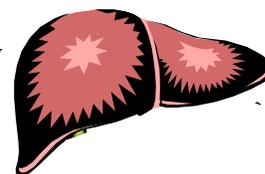
Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection was first recognized in the 1970's, when people who had blood transfusions developed a new type of hepatitis (not A or B). It wasn't until 1988, when the Hepatitis C virus was discovered, that the majority of these were found to be due to this virus.

Hepatitis C is now recognized as a serious national problem. Nearly 5 million Americans are infected. HCV is now known to be responsible for 8,000 to 10,000 deaths a year. This number is expected to triple in the next 10 to 20 years. HCV is becoming a leading cause of cirrhosis, liver failure and liver cancer.

In late 1998, the Veterans Health Administration identified Hepatitis C as an important health problem in veterans. Veterans seem to have an increased risk of carrying this infection. A six-week survey at one VA medical center revealed that 20% of inpatients had Hepatitis C. Another medical center found 10%. The VA Transplant Program in Portland tells us that more than 60% of all recent VA liver transplant patients have Hepatitis C.

What Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that infects the liver. It is currently the most common cause of chronic liver disease in the United States.



How is someone exposed to Hepatitis C?

People become infected with Hepatitis C when there is blood to blood contact with a person who already has this infection. The virus of the blood of an infected person must get into the bloodstream of the uninfected person.

Who is at risk of Hepatitis C?

You are more likely to contract Hepatitis C if you:

- Had a blood transfusion before 1992
- Have been a hemodialysis patient
- Had a job that exposed you to human blood
- Have been in contact with the blood of someone else (example, by fighting, or sharing razors or toothbrushes)



-
-
- Have ever injected or snorted drugs
 - Have tattoos or body piercing

Some people have no risk factors that they can think of.

The Veterans Health Administration recommends testing for Vietnam-era veterans, and for anyone who is concerned about possible exposure.



Why is Hepatitis C such a serious problem?

First, Hepatitis C causes long-term (“chronic”) infection in the majority of people.

- Over 85% of people who have been exposed to Hepatitis C remain infected, even though they may have no symptoms.

Second, it can be spread between people who don’t know they have it.

- People who are infected with Hepatitis C can spread it to others.

Third, it can cause serious liver problems for a small percentage of people.

- Most people with Hepatitis C have a mild disease, but up to 20% of people may have a more serious condition. This more serious condition can progress to cirrhosis (scarring of the liver). This can occur silently, with very few symptoms. Serious liver problems and cirrhosis usually occur many years after a person was infected. Liver cancer or the need for liver transplant can occur in a smaller number of patients.
- Most people with Hepatitis C have a good long-term outcome. However, a complete medical evaluation is the only way a person with Hepatitis C can find out how the virus is affecting their liver.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

The symptoms of Hepatitis C infection are often very mild, and a person might not have any at all. The most common ones are fatigue, flu-like symptoms, joint and muscle aches, nausea, or loss of appetite. Symptoms may come and go. Of course, these are very common symptoms for other reasons, too!

How do I know if I have Hepatitis C?

Only a blood test can detect Hepatitis C virus infection. You can't tell whether you are infected by how you feel.



How can people protect themselves from getting Hepatitis C?

- Don't use IV drugs. If you do, don't share your needles or works.
- Don't snort drugs. If you do, don't share straws.
- If you get pierced or tattooed, make sure the needles are sterile.
- Don't share razors or toothbrushes, which can carry small amounts of infected blood.
- Don't touch the blood of someone who might be infected (let them clean up after their own nosebleeds or cuts).
- If you are a healthcare worker, of course, you should use standard barrier precautions against any contact with blood or body fluids.



Is there a vaccine against Hepatitis C?

No, there is currently no vaccine against Hepatitis C. There are immunizations available to protect people from the other forms of hepatitis, A and B.



Is there a treatment for Hepatitis C?

Yes. The most common treatment is a combination of two medications, interferon and ribavirin. Interferon is taken as a self-injection, several times a week, for 6 to 12 months. It eliminates the virus in some of the people who take it, but it also has significant side effects. The decision whether interferon-based treatment would be helpful is a complex one, and depends on the person's individual situation. Researchers are developing new, and better treatments.

How can people with Hepatitis C help themselves to stay healthy?

People with Hepatitis C can do many things to help maintain their health, to protect their liver from further damage, and to help their immune system fight this virus.

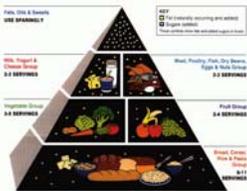
- **Either stop drinking, or limit your alcohol intake to an occasional drink.** When someone has Hepatitis C, heavy drinking of any kind of alcohol - beer, wine, liquor - can lead to more serious liver damage.

- Be vaccinated against Hepatitis A & B, to prevent your liver from another viral infection.

- Review any medications with your health care provider to make sure they are safe for your liver. This includes prescribed medications, as well as over the counter remedies, herbs, supplements, and vitamins.



- Get regular medical care, whether or not you feel sick. Additional tests may be needed to see if you have liver damage, and to help determine if treatment might be helpful for you.



- Take good care of yourself, mentally and physically! Get enough sleep, eat a good healthy diet, and stop using drugs or alcohol.

- Many people find it is helpful to join a support group or share their concerns with family, friends or a therapist.

Can someone get Hepatitis C from food, water, or sexual contact? No!

- Hepatitis C virus is only present in an infected person's blood. It is **not** present in tears, or sweat, or saliva, or semen, or vaginal secretions (**unless these are contaminated with blood**).

- Sharing food, drink, or eating utensils with someone who has Hepatitis C disease won't infect you.

- Hugging or kissing or touching someone who has the disease won't infect you.



- For long-term, monogamous partners, the chance of spreading this infection sexually is virtually zero. In most relationships where one partner has Hepatitis C, the other partner does not become infected through sexual contact.

-
-
- If you have multiple sexual partners, it is **always** a good idea to use condoms to protect yourself from sexually transmitted infections, including Hepatitis B and HIV.
 - Hepatitis C is rarely spread from mother to fetus, and is not spread by breastfeeding.



How can I find out more?

If you are concerned about Hepatitis C, it is quite easy to have a blood test. Just ask your health care provider at your next visit.



If you would like more information, ask your primary care provider, or visit the VA's Health Information Center in the library or your public library. There are many books, articles and pamphlets available.

There are also several websites that have excellent information, including some that have information specifically for veterans with Hepatitis C.



Here are a couple of places to start:

Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C:

www.va.gov/hepatitisc

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis

Hepatitis Central (patient-created website)

www.hepatitis-central.com

American Liver Foundation:

www.liverfoundation.org