

H e p a t i t i s C

What you should
know



Pharmaceuticals



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Hepatitis C: a part of life for many people

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver, which is often caused by a virus. While there are several types of hepatitis, hepatitis C is actually the most common.

- According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an estimated 3.9 million Americans are infected with hepatitis C, most of whom are chronically infected
- Hepatitis C is the most common blood-borne infection in the United States

If you or someone you know has hepatitis C, you'll want to learn as much as you can about the virus. This booklet is a good starting point. But, remember, your doctor is your best source for information on your condition and its treatment.

Since you may not know all of the medical words in this booklet, we've included a glossary with definitions at the back.



What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is **one of the many types of hepatitis caused by a virus that infects the liver**. First, the hepatitis C virus enters the body and looks for liver cells to use as its host. It then begins to interfere with normal cell activity. The hepatitis C virus multiplies very slowly over many years. That's one reason why hepatitis C symptoms sometimes take a long time to appear.

When someone becomes infected with the hepatitis C virus, **the first stage of the disease is called acute hepatitis C**. During this stage the liver becomes inflamed. The infected person may feel sick...or may have no symptoms at all. Sometimes, the liver is able to get rid of the virus and go back to normal on its own. However, **in up to 85% of hepatitis C cases, the inflammation doesn't go away**. When that happens, it's called **chronic** (or long-lasting) **hepatitis C**.

Hepatitis C affects everyone differently. Some people develop serious problems within 5 years of getting the virus. However, the majority of people still feel fine after 20 years or more.

What does my liver do?

The liver is a very important organ that's also part of the digestive system. It helps remove toxins and waste products from your blood. In fact, almost everything that enters your body, plus a large amount of the chemicals that are made by other organs, goes through the liver at some point. Your liver is responsible for so many things, that any damage to it can cause problems in other parts of your body. That's why hepatitis C is such a serious concern.

Here's what your liver does:

- Stores vitamins, minerals, iron and sugars
- Produces protein, bile and blood-clotting agents
- Regulates cholesterol and chemicals/drugs in the blood
- Keeps hormones at the correct level
- Acts as a filter to cleanse blood and discharge waste products into bile

To help keep your liver healthy, it's important to eat well and avoid alcohol and recreational drugs. If you have hepatitis C, this is even more critical!



How could hepatitis C affect my liver?

Remember, hepatitis C **mainly affects the liver**. Sometimes, years—even decades—may go by before someone's liver is damaged and that person feels ill. To check your liver health, your doctor may do a liver biopsy. During a biopsy, a tiny sample of the liver is removed and examined by a laboratory. The results of the biopsy can help your doctor decide how to treat your hepatitis C.

Liver damage can cause problems with blood passing through the organ. This can make liver cells die. It's then harder for the liver to store nutrients and to take toxins out of the body. **The longer you have untreated hepatitis C, the greater your risk may be of developing other liver health problems.**

For example, **if liver damage caused by the virus is left untreated, it can sometimes lead to cirrhosis**—a serious condition where normal liver cells are replaced by scar tissue. A liver with scar tissue cannot heal itself, even if the inflammation goes away. Cirrhosis typically occurs in about 20% of people infected with hepatitis C.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

As with any illness, people experience hepatitis C symptoms in different ways. Some will have several symptoms, but others will feel just fine. Symptoms can seem to come and go, or be longer lasting. **Liver damage can occur whether or not there are symptoms.** And it's also possible to have severe symptoms but no liver damage at all.

It's important to point out that very few people with hepatitis C have all of the symptoms listed below. Also, just because you may have one or more of these symptoms doesn't mean you have the virus. **The only way to know for sure whether or not you have hepatitis C is to take a blood test.** To find out more about blood tests, please talk with your doctor.

Here are some symptoms to watch for:

- **Aches:** Flu-like illness; joint pain; general weakness or feeling tired
- **Nutrition:** Loss of appetite; blood-sugar disorders
- **Gastrointestinal:** Indigestion; diarrhea
- **Psychological:** Depression; mood swings; mental fatigue
- **Sleep:** Irregular or poor sleep quality, not feeling rested after sleep

How are people infected with hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease caused by a blood-borne virus that is passed from person to person when infected blood comes in contact with noninfected blood. It is also possible to contract hepatitis C from infected body fluids, although transmission through body fluids is less likely.

About 10% of people with hepatitis C don't know how they got the virus. The best way to prevent hepatitis C is to learn the risk factors—and to avoid any unsafe activities.

Some ways people can come in contact with hepatitis C-infected blood or body fluids:

- Blood transfusions (before July 1992), operations and infected blood products
- Intravenous drug use (past or present—even one-time use)
- Tattooing or body piercing
- Occupational, eg, needlestick and dental treatment
- Needles, dialysis equipment and other medical equipment
- Transmission from mother to child during birth
- Shared personal hygiene items (such as razors, toothbrushes, nail files)
- Intramucosally (that is, through the tissues lining body openings) when taking cocaine and other drugs
- Sexual activity that involves contact with infected blood or body fluids
- Acupuncture

How can I avoid spreading hepatitis C?

If you have or suspect that you have hepatitis C, it's very important that you protect others who may come in contact with your blood or body fluids. The good news is that if you take some simple steps, you can reduce the chance of infecting others.

What you can do to avoid passing hepatitis C on to others:

- Advise anyone (such as sexual partners, doctors or dentists) who could come in contact with your blood or body fluids if you suspect or know that you have hepatitis C
- Don't share any personal hygiene items (razors, nail files and toothbrushes)
- Carefully dispose of items that may contain your blood or body fluids (tissues, swabs and tampons)
- Use disinfectants and bandages to cover cuts and wounds
- Avoid sexual practices that may cause contact with blood
- Do not donate blood, organs, bone marrow, eggs or semen

Help with hepatitis C

If you suspect you may have hepatitis C or you've already been diagnosed, it's important to take care of yourself. Your doctor can answer your questions, help with symptoms that may be bothering you and help you decide if and which medication is right for you. Your doctor is an important partner in your fight against hepatitis C.

Glossary

Acute hepatitis: The first stage of the disease following infection. During this stage, a person may or may not have symptoms, and the disease may or may not go away on its own

Blood-borne virus: A virus that circulates in the blood and can be transmitted from one person to another during blood-to-blood contact (eg, through shared needles)

Chronic hepatitis: Persistent inflammation of the liver, which may lead to other liver problems

Cirrhosis [sih-ROE-sis]: A condition in which normal liver cells die and are replaced by scar tissue

Host cell: A cell infected by a virus

Infection: Contamination by a disease-producing agent (eg, a virus)

Liver biopsy [BYE-op-see]: Extracting a tiny sample of the liver with a needle to be examined by a laboratory

Liver inflammation: A biological response to cellular injury that may affect liver function

Virus: A tiny infectious agent that causes disease



Hepatitis C information resources

American Liver Foundation

75 Maiden Lane, Suite 603
New York, NY 10038
(800) GO-LIVER (465-4837)
(888) 4-HEP-ABC (443-7222)
<http://www.liverfoundation.org>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
(888) 4-HEP-CDC (443-7232)
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis>

Hepatitis Foundation International

504 Blick Drive
Silver Spring, MD 20904-2901
(800) 891-0707
(301) 622-4200
<http://www.hepfi.org>

Hep C Connection

1177 Grant Street, Suite 200
Denver, CO 80203
(800) 522-HEPC (4372)
(303) 860-0800
<http://www.hepc-connection.org>

HIV and Hepatitis.com

P.O.Box 14288
San Francisco, CA 94114
<http://www.hivandhepatitis.com>

National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project (NATAP)

580 Broadway, Suite 1010
New York, NY 10012
(888) 26-NATAP (62827)
(212) 219-0106
<http://www.natap.org>

National Hepatitis C Coalition, Inc.

P.O. Box 5058
Hemet, CA 92544
National Hepline: (909) 658-4414
<http://www.nationalhepatitis-c.org>

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