

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that can cause infections in humans. It usually infects the liver and causes inflammation. Inflammation is when the body produces cells to fight an infection. This inflammation can cause swelling of the liver and long-term can cause cirrhosis or scarring of the liver.

What happens if I get exposed to hepatitis C?

This is called the **natural history** of hepatitis C. When someone first gets exposed to hepatitis C, the virus gets into the blood stream and goes to the liver. When the infection first occurs, there usually are not any symptoms and the person does not feel sick. One in five people will clear the infection on their own without any medicine but 4 of 5 people will have infection the rest of their life, called “**chronic hepatitis C.**”

With chronic hepatitis, the liver can swell because of the inflammation. About 15-20% of people with chronic hepatitis C will develop **cirrhosis**, which is scarring or fibrosis of the liver tissue. It usually takes about 20-40 years for this to occur; this occurs faster in people who also have HIV, from 7-10 years. If someone develops cirrhosis, there is a small chance that they may develop cancer of the liver called **hepatocellular carcinoma** (HCC). Patients with cirrhosis often feel sick and have many problems, such as swelling of their stomach or legs, shortness of breath, bleeding from their anus or vomiting of blood, yellowing of their skin or eyes (**jaundice**), or tiredness and fatigue. Eventually your liver can die from the cirrhosis.

How did I get infected with hepatitis C? Can I pass it to other people?

Hepatitis C is passed from person-to-person by exposure to blood or body fluids or during pregnancy and delivery. The most common way that it is passed is by blood exposure, such as by sharing needles or getting a blood transfusion. Blood transfusions were not screened for hepatitis C until the mid-1990's so many people were infected by transfusion. Using drugs and sharing needles can pass the infection; getting a tattoo with an unclean needle or sharing a toothbrush or razor can also pass the infection since blood may be present. Sharing a straw to snort cocaine has also been seen as a way of passing hepatitis C. A mother with chronic hepatitis C has about a 5% of infecting her baby during delivery. Hepatitis C can also be passed by sex.

If you have chronic hepatitis C, you should not donate blood or organs or sperm, or share needles, razors, drug “works”, nail clippers, or toothbrushes with anyone else. If you have a new sexual partner, you should use condoms for vaginal or anal sex to prevent infections. If you are pregnant, your baby's doctor needs to know you have chronic hepatitis C.

If you have further questions, be sure to talk to your primary care provider or health educator or nurse.