



Facts At-A-Glance

- Hepatitis C is a serious viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV).
- The hepatitis C virus is transmitted through direct exposure to infected blood. In America, most cases of hepatitis C are caused by sharing needles used to inject illegal drugs.
- As many as 4 million Americans are infected with hepatitis C.
- Most hepatitis C patients have no symptoms. They may have the disease for many years before it is discovered.
- A simple blood test will let you know if you have hepatitis C.
- The hepatitis C virus stays in the liver, where it causes continuous damage that can lead to cirrhosis (scarring) and liver cancer.
- The first stage of the disease is called acute hepatitis C. Some people fight off the virus in this stage, but most cases evolve into a long-term infection known as chronic hepatitis C.
- For some hepatitis C patients, antiviral medicines may be helpful in fighting the virus and limiting liver damage.
- There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.

At the American Liver Foundation, we are committed to liver health and we are here to help you. Contact us!



Your Liver. Your Life.

75 Maiden Lane, Suite 603, New York, NY 10038-4810
tel: 212-668-1000 | fax: 212-483-8179

For more information or to find a local chapter near you,
visit www.liverfoundation.org.
National HelpLine 800-GO-LIVER (800-465-4837)

The American Liver Foundation is the nation's leading nonprofit organization promoting liver health and disease prevention. We provide research, education, and advocacy for those affected by liver-related diseases, including hepatitis.

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Hepatitis C

What You Need to Know —

Important information about this serious liver disease and how to manage it.



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What causes hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver that is caused by the hepatitis C virus, or HCV. You can get hepatitis C if your blood comes into contact with blood from someone who already has the virus.

The most common cause of transmission is the sharing of needles and other equipment used to inject illegal drugs. Less common causes of transmission include:

- ✚ Sharing a razor, toothbrush or nail clipper with an infected person
- ✚ Accidental exposure to infected blood by health care or public safety workers
- ✚ Exposure to unclean tattooing or body piercing instruments
- ✚ Unprotected anal sex or exposure to multiple sex partners

In rare cases, hepatitis C can be spread from an infected mother to her child at birth. It cannot be spread by breast-feeding.

Before 1992 there was a risk of getting hepatitis C from blood transfusions. Now all donated blood is tested for HCV so there is almost no risk of getting the disease from blood transfusions.

How long does hepatitis C last?

Between 15 to 40 percent of people who get hepatitis C are able to fight off the virus during the early, or acute, stage, usually within six months. Between 60 and 85 percent of patients cannot get rid of the virus and develop a long-term, or chronic, HCV infection. People with chronic HCV will have the disease all their lives unless they are successfully treated with antiviral medicines.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people with both acute and chronic hepatitis C have no symptoms from the disease. This is why hepatitis C may persist for years or even decades before it is discovered. When symptoms do occur they may include fatigue, joint pain, itchy skin, muscle soreness, stomach pain and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes).

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Hepatitis C is diagnosed by a blood test. However, blood tests conducted in routine physicals do not include tests for hepatitis C. This is why most people with hepatitis C don't know they have the disease, especially since there are no symptoms. They may discover that they have the disease if they donate blood because all donated blood is tested for HCV.

Blood tests for other medical problems may show persistently abnormal liver enzymes, in which case additional blood tests will be conducted to determine the cause of liver damage. These additional tests may reveal the diagnosis of HCV infection.

In patients with hepatitis C, a biopsy of the liver, in which a sample of liver tissue is removed and studied in a lab, may be necessary to determine how badly the liver has been damaged by the virus.

Who is at risk of getting hepatitis C?

Anyone who was exposed to the blood of an infected person is at risk of having hepatitis C. You should talk to a doctor about getting tested for the disease if you:

- ✚ Ever used illegal intravenous drugs or cocaine
- ✚ Received a blood transfusion or organ transplant prior to 1992, or a clotting factor made before 1987
- ✚ Received long-term hemodialysis
- ✚ Have persistently abnormal ALT levels
- ✚ Are a health care, emergency medical and public safety worker exposed to needle sticks or other sources of HCV-positive blood
- ✚ Were born to an HCV-infected mother
- ✚ Have had unprotected sex with multiple partners or have a history of sexually transmitted disease
- ✚ Received tattoos or body piercings with unsterile needles, especially in an unregulated setting
- ✚ Have household exposure, through the sharing of razors, toothbrushes or other personal items with an HCV infected person

How is hepatitis C treated?

For some hepatitis C patients, antiviral medicines such as peginterferons and ribavirin may help fight off the virus and limit liver damage from the disease. These drugs don't work for all HCV patients, and they have some potentially serious side effects. In addition, certain people, such as pregnant women, should not use them at all. It is important to thoroughly discuss the pros and cons of hepatitis C treatment with your doctor.

What is the best way to prevent hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C, so the only way to avoid the disease is to avoid exposure to infected blood. Infection can be avoided by:

- ✚ Not sharing needles for illegal drugs
- ✚ Always using recommended safety precautions if you are exposed to blood at your job
- ✚ Not engaging in risky sexual practices with people who may have hepatitis C
- ✚ Not sharing personal hygiene items with infected household members or others

How should chronic hepatitis C be managed?

Hepatitis C is a serious, long-term condition that can lead to potentially fatal liver diseases such as cirrhosis and cancer. However, with proper management, many hepatitis C patients can lead full and active lives. If you are infected with hepatitis C, you should:

- ✚ Maintain a healthy lifestyle by eating nutritious meals, getting exercise, resting when you feel tired and avoiding alcohol and illegal drugs
- ✚ Be under the care of a doctor who specializes in the liver
- ✚ Stay on any prescribed medications and keep all your medical appointments
- ✚ Consider joining a hepatitis C support group, either in your community or online. Your local American Liver Foundation chapter may be able to refer you a support group in your area.