

What is Hepatitis C virus?

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver that results from the Hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV is one of the most common types of viral Hepatitis in the United States. Others include Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B.

How is Hepatitis C virus spread?

HCV is spread when blood from a person infected with HCV enters the body of someone who is not infected. Most people become infected with HCV by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs, receiving donated blood, blood products and organs before 1992 and needle stick injuries in healthcare settings. People have also become infected with HCV from body piercing or tattoos received in prisons, homes, or in other unlicensed or informal facilities. In rare cases, HCV may be sexually transmitted. Babies born to mothers with HCV can get infected during childbirth.

HCV is NOT spread by casual contact, including sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, or sneezing. It is also not spread through food or water.

What are the signs and symptoms of Hepatitis C virus infection?

Approximately 70%–80% of people with acute (short-term illness) HCV infection do not have any symptoms. About one to three months after exposure, the following signs and symptoms occur in a small proportion of infected people:

- Fatigue
- Nausea or poor appetite
- Stomach pain
- Dark-colored urine
- Yellow discoloration in the skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Fever
- Muscle and joint pains

How long after infection do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually don't occur until late in the course of chronic (long-term illness) infection. In those persons who do develop symptoms, the average time is 6-7 weeks after exposure, but this can range from 2 weeks to 6 months.

Who is most at risk?

HCV testing is recommended for anyone at increased risk for HCV infection, including:

- Persons born from 1945 through 1965
- Persons who have ever injected illegal drugs, including those who injected only once many years ago and shared any drug injection equipment
- Recipients of donated blood, blood products and organs before 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 or by a non-licensed facility
- People with known exposures to HCV, such as:
 - Healthcare workers injured by needle sticks
 - Recipients of blood or organs from a donor who tested positive for HCV
- HIV-infected persons
- Children born to mothers infected with HCV

What type of health problems are caused by Hepatitis C virus infection?

Unless successfully treated with medication, chronic HCV infection can cause other serious health problems, such as cirrhosis, liver cancer and liver failure. A small percentage of persons with chronic HCV infection develop medical conditions due to HCV that are not limited to the liver. Such conditions can include Diabetes mellitus, which occurs three times more frequently in HCV-infected persons, kidney disease, Non-Hodgkins lymphoma, which might occur somewhat more frequently in HCV-infected persons.

How is Hepatitis C virus infection diagnosed?

Several different blood tests are used to test for HCV. Your healthcare provider may order one or a combination of these tests. Typically,

a person will first get a screening test that will show whether he or she has developed antibodies to HCV. (An antibody is a substance found in the blood that the body produces in response to a virus.) Having a positive antibody test means that a person was exposed to the virus at some time during his or her life. If the antibody test is positive, your healthcare provider will most likely order a second test to confirm whether the virus is still present in your bloodstream.

How is Hepatitis C virus infection treated?

HCV is treatable. There are several anti-viral medications that are available to treat HCV. Success of treatment depends on many factors, including the classification of HCV, previous treatment, cirrhosis and other infections.

If a person is successfully treated and has no detectable virus in the blood for more than 6 months, the person is considered cured and is no longer infectious to others.

How can Hepatitis C virus infection be prevented?

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV infection. You can reduce your risk of becoming infected by doing the following:

- If you're injecting drugs, try to get into a treatment program. If you continue to use drugs, don't share needles or other equipment with anyone else.



- Make sure all equipment has been sterilized if you're getting body piercings or a tattoo and go to a licensed professional.
- If you're a healthcare worker, follow your institution's safety precautions. For example, wear protective clothing and gloves and dispose of contaminated sharp objects properly.
- If you have more than one sex partner or are a man having sex with other men, use condoms for sexual intercourse.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal healthcare provider
- [American Liver Foundation](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- hcvadvocate.org

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