

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver.

It is estimated that 35,000 new infections occur each year and that 8,000 to 10,000 Americans die each year because of hepatitis C. Infection with hepatitis C was more common in earlier years. For example it is estimated that 230,000 new infections occurred every year during the 1980s.

Over 85% of infected persons develop chronic infection with hepatitis C virus, and it is estimated there are more than 4 million chronically infected Americans.

Hepatitis C is a growing health problem. Approximately half of all liver transplants each year in this country are required because of hepatitis C. And, the death rate from hepatitis C is expected to triple over the next 10-15 years.

If I had another type of hepatitis or hepatitis vaccination, am I protected against hepatitis C?

No. Hepatitis C virus is different from the viruses that cause hepatitis A or hepatitis B. Having had one of these infections or having been vaccinated against hepatitis A or B will not protect you against infection with hepatitis C.

How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C virus is spread mostly by exposure to human blood. You may have gotten hepatitis C if:

- you ever injected street drugs, even if you experimented a few times many years ago
- you were treated for clotting problems with a blood product made before 1987
- you received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant from an infected donor
- you were ever on long-term kidney dialysis
- you were ever a health care worker and had frequent contact with blood in the work place, especially accidental needle sticks
- your mother had hepatitis C at the time she gave birth to you
- you ever had sex with a person infected with hepatitis C
- you lived with someone who was infected with hepatitis C and shared items such as razors or toothbrushes that might have had blood on them
- you received tattoos or body piercing while in a jail or prison

Not all persons with hepatitis C have one of these risk factors. About half of all cases cannot identify the source of infection.

Hepatitis C is not transmitted through:

- food or water
- sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses
- casual contact
- breast feeding
- hugging or shaking hands
- sneezing or coughing
- oral sex

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

The majority of persons with hepatitis C have no symptoms. A small percentage of people have symptoms of hepatitis within a few weeks of infection, but for the majority of persons this is a chronic infection and it may take 20 or more years before symptoms develop, if they ever do. Chronic hepatitis C may lower a person's energy and strength so that they are forced to significantly reduce daily activities such as cooking, exercising, and shopping. A few may even be forced to stop working.

Of every 100 persons infected with hepatitis C virus about:

- 85 persons will develop long-term infection
- 70 persons will develop chronic liver disease
- 15 persons will develop cirrhosis of the liver over a period of 20 to 30 years
- 5 persons will die from liver cancer or cirrhosis as the consequence of long-term infection

Persons with end-stage liver disease due to hepatitis C are candidates for liver transplants. About 50% of persons with chronic hepatitis C who receive a liver transplant suffer damage to their new liver within 1 to 3 years after transplantation.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

The diagnosis of hepatitis C is based on personal history and blood tests. These tests cannot tell if the person got the infection recently, or sometime in the past.

If a person has hepatitis C what should they do to protect others?

There does not appear to be any risk of infection by simply being around a person with hepatitis C virus. Persons living in the same household as a hepatitis C infected person can have a slight risk of infection if they share blood contaminated items.

Infected persons should:

- not donate blood, body organs, other tissue, or semen
- not share personal items that might have blood on them, such as razors, toothbrushes or nail-grooming equipment
- cover cuts and skin sores

What is the risk that a hepatitis C virus infected woman will infect her newborn infant?

About 5 out of every 100 infants born to hepatitis C virus infected women become infected. This occurs at the time of birth, and there is no treatment that can prevent this from happening. Most infants infected at the time of birth have no symptoms and do well during childhood.

Can hepatitis C be treated?

Yes, but it doesn't often work well. More than 60% of people will not benefit from treatment.

What should an infected person do to protect their liver?

- see their doctor regularly
- stop using alcohol
- stop injecting drugs and get into a drug treatment program
- if the person cannot stop injecting drugs, do not reuse or share syringes, water, or drug works
- don't start any new medications or use over-the-counter, herbal, and other medicines without a physician's knowledge
- get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B

Since hepatitis C virus is found in the blood, are blood transfusions safe?

Yes. The federal government requires that all blood and blood products be tested for hepatitis C virus. Those products that test positive are not used for transfusions.