

Hepatitis C

(HCV)



What is hepatitis C?

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. Toxins, certain drugs, some diseases, heavy alcohol use, and bacterial and viral infections can all cause hepatitis.

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that ranges in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness.

- **Acute hepatitis C virus infection** is a short-term illness that occurs within the first six months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Acute infection will, in most cases, lead to chronic infection.
- **Chronic hepatitis C virus infection** is a long-term illness that occurs when the hepatitis C virus remains in a person’s body.

How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood from an infected person enters the body through a break in the skin or mucous membranes (e.g., eyes, sores in the mouth). Today, most people become infected with the hepatitis C virus by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Before 1992, when widespread screening of the blood supply began in the United States, hepatitis C was also commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Hepatitis C is not spread by sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, sneezing, or other casual contact. Hepatitis C virus is not found in urine or feces and is not spread through food or water.

Who is at risk for hepatitis C

Some people are at increased risk for hepatitis C, including:

- Injection drug users, including those who injected only one time or many years ago
- Recipients of donated blood, blood products, and organs (once a common means of transmission but now rare in the United States since blood screening became available in 1992)
- People who received a blood product for clotting problems made before 1987
- Hemodialysis patients or persons who spend many years on dialysis for kidney failure
- People who received body piercing or tattoos done with non-sterile instruments

- People with known exposures to hepatitis C, such as:
 - Healthcare workers injured by needle sticks
 - Recipients of blood or organs from a donor who tested positive for the hepatitis C virus
- HIV-infected persons
- Children born to mothers infected with hepatitis C

Less common risks include:

- Having sexual contact with a person who is infected with the hepatitis C virus
- Sharing personal care items, such as razors or toothbrushes, that may have come in contact with the blood of an infected person

When and for how long is a person able to spread hepatitis C?

A person is contagious during the time that the hepatitis C virus is detectable in their blood. People can infect others for several weeks before their symptoms begin and until their infection resolves. People who have chronic hepatitis C are always contagious. A person does not have to have symptoms to spread the disease.

How soon after an infection do the symptoms appear?

On average, symptoms appear six to seven weeks after exposure, but they can appear any time between two weeks and six months after exposure. However, most people with acute hepatitis C do not develop symptoms.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Acute hepatitis C symptoms:

Most people with acute hepatitis C do not have any symptoms. Some people, however, can have mild to severe symptoms soon after being infected, including:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine
- Clay-colored bowel movements

- Joint pain
- Jaundice (yellow color in the skin or the eyes)

Symptoms usually last a few weeks, but some people can be ill for as long as six months.

Chronic hepatitis C symptoms:

Some people with chronic hepatitis C have ongoing symptoms such as fatigue or joint pain, but most individuals remain symptom free for as long as 20 or 30 years. About 15% to 25% of people with chronic hepatitis C develop serious liver conditions, such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer. Even as the liver becomes diseased, some people still do not have symptoms, although certain tests for liver function may show some abnormalities.

Does the infection of hepatitis C make a person immune?

Infection with hepatitis C can lead to immunity – if you recover from acute infection and the infection does not progress to chronic infection. Approximately 75–85% of people acutely infected will go on to develop a chronic infection.

Once you recover from hepatitis C, you must get tested by your provider to see if you have cleared the virus. Being free from symptoms does not mean that your immune system fought off the infection.

What are the complications associated with hepatitis C?

Chronic hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer, or even death. Approximately 8,000–10,000 people die every year from hepatitis C-related liver disease in the United States.

What can be done to prevent the spread of hepatitis C?

There are many ways that you can reduce the risk of others getting hepatitis C if you are infected:

- Do not share needles or any other injection supplies, including water. Always wash hands before injecting.
- Do not share any straws to snort drugs, or pipes to smoke drugs.
- Cover any open cuts or wounds.
- The risk from sexual transmission is low but using condoms and barriers may reduce the risk.
- Make sure that standard safety precautions are being carefully followed in healthcare settings.
- Do not share any personal hygiene items such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers or pierced earrings. Cover personal items and keep them separate from other people you live with.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?

No. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. Hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccination is recommended for anyone with hepatitis C. This will help protect the liver from further damage by diseases that are preventable.

Is there treatment for hepatitis C?

There are several treatment options for people with chronic hepatitis C infections. There are a number of medications for hepatitis C that clear the virus at a very high rate with more than 90% of patients who complete treatment being cured. Current standard of care medications for hepatitis C include:

- Sovaldi (sofosbuvir)
- Harvoni (ledipasvir and sofosbuvir)
- Viekira Pak
- Daklinza
- Technivie
- Zepatier
- Epclusa
- Viekira XR
- Vosevi

For more information:

Spokane Regional Health District
Disease Prevention and Response
(509) 324.1442 | TDD (509) 324.1464