

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, long-term illness. Hepatitis C is often described as “acute,” meaning a new infection, or “chronic,” meaning long-term infection.

What is the difference between short-term and long-term Hepatitis C?

Short-term (acute) hepatitis C occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C can be a short-term illness, but for most people, acute infection leads to chronic infection.

Long-term (chronic) hepatitis C can be a lifelong infection if left untreated. Chronic hepatitis C can cause serious health problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and even death.

How is Hepatitis C Spread?

Hepatitis C is passed from person to person through blood. This can happen through:

- Sharing drug-injection equipment
 - Today, most people become infected with hepatitis C by sharing needles, syringes, or any other equipment used to prepare and inject drugs.
- Birth
 - Approximately 6% of infants born to infected mothers will get hepatitis C.
- Health care exposures
 - Although uncommon, people can become infected when health-care professionals do not follow the proper steps needed to prevent the spread of bloodborne infections.
- Sex with an infected person
 - While uncommon, hepatitis C can spread during sex, though it has been reported more often among men who have sex with men.
- Unregulated tattoos or body piercings
 - Hepatitis C can spread when getting tattoos or body piercings in unlicensed facilities, informal settings, or with non-sterile instruments.
- Sharing personal items
 - People can get infected from sharing glucose monitors, razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, and other items that may have come into contact with infected blood, even in amounts too small to see.
- Blood transfusions and organ transplants
 - Before widespread screening of the blood supply in 1992, hepatitis C was also spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Now, the risk of transmission to recipients of blood or blood products is extremely low.

Hepatitis C is not spread by sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, or sneezing. It is also not spread through food or water.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Many people newly infected with the hepatitis C virus don't have symptoms, don't look or feel sick, and therefore don't know they are infected. For people who develop symptoms, they usually happen 2–12 weeks after exposure to the hepatitis C virus and can include yellow skin or eyes, not wanting to eat, upset stomach, throwing up, stomach pain, fever, dark urine, light-colored stool, joint pain, and feeling tired. Most people with chronic hepatitis C don't have any symptoms or have only general symptoms like chronic fatigue and depression. Many people eventually develop chronic liver disease, which can range from mild to severe and include cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer. Chronic liver disease in people with hepatitis C usually happens slowly, without any signs or symptoms, over several decades. Chronic hepatitis C virus infection is often not recognized until people are screened for blood donation or from an abnormal blood test found during a routine doctor's visit.

How do I know if I have Hepatitis C?

A blood test, called an HCV antibody test, is used to find out if someone has ever been infected with the hepatitis C virus. This test, sometimes called the anti-HCV test, looks for antibodies, which are proteins released into the bloodstream when someone gets infected with the virus that causes hepatitis C. People who have positive HCV antibody tests are given a follow-up HCV RNA test to learn whether they have active infection.

Who should get tested for Hepatitis C?

People should get tested if they:

- Are 18 years of age and older (get tested at least once in your lifetime)
- Are pregnant (get tested during each pregnancy)
- Currently inject drugs (get tested regularly)
- Have ever injected drugs, even if it was just once or many years ago
- Have HIV
- Have abnormal liver tests or liver disease
- Are on hemodialysis
- Received donated blood or organs before July 1992
- Received clotting factor concentrates before 1987
- Have been exposed to blood from a person who has Hepatitis C
- Were born to a mother with Hepatitis C

How is Hepatitis C treated?

Treatment is recommended for all people, including non-pregnant women, with acute or chronic hepatitis C (including children aged ≥ 3 years and adolescents). Current treatments usually involve just 8–12 weeks of oral therapy (pills) and cure over 90% with few side effects.

Is there a vaccine for Hepatitis C?

No, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C but there are vaccines for hepatitis types A and B. If you have hepatitis C you should get the vaccine for types A and B to help protect your liver.

For more information:

Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website at <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/index.htm> or call Huron County Public Health at 419-668-1652 ext. 269.