

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Hepatitis C

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What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is any kind of inflammation (a reaction which can include swelling and pain) of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by many things including viruses (type of germ), drugs, chemicals and alcohol. At this time, there are five viruses known to affect the liver in particular. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. These viruses are very different from one another, but all are infectious and may cause similar symptoms. They differ in how they are spread, how long the infection lasts, and how they are treated. A healthcare provider can test a person's blood for hepatitis A, B and C virus infection.

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus. The hepatitis C virus is found in the blood and liver of people with hepatitis C infection. Most people with hepatitis C will go on to have chronic infection (long-term infection) and can pass it on to others. Some of these people will develop liver damage and feel very sick while others may remain healthy for many years. The virus can eventually cause cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and/or liver cancer in some people.

How is it spread?

The hepatitis C virus is spread primarily by direct contact with the blood (or body fluids containing blood) of an infected person. The most common way that hepatitis C virus is spread is through the use of injection drugs. Sharing needles, works, cotton, water, or any other drug injection equipment with an infected person can spread the virus. In the past, some people became infected after receiving a blood transfusion or organ transplant. Since July 1992, however, the blood supply has been carefully checked for this virus and the blood supply is considered safe. Health care workers can get infected through needlesticks or sharps exposures on the job. The virus can be spread by sharing personal items such as a toothbrush, razor, or anything else that has blood on it. It can also be spread by tattooing, body piercing or acupuncture needles that have not been sterilized.

The hepatitis C virus can sometimes spread through sexual activity, but this is not common among people with one steady, long-term partner. People who have multiple sex partners have a greater risk of getting hepatitis C infection. Infected mothers can pass it on to their babies at birth.

The hepatitis C virus is NOT spread by casual contact such as hugging, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food and drinks.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of hepatitis C may include yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice), tiredness, loss of appetite, weight loss, nausea, stomach ache, and dark urine. Years later, cirrhosis may occur in some who are infected, when scar tissue replaces healthy liver cells.

How soon do symptoms appear?

When first infected with hepatitis C, a person may have no symptoms at all, or may have only mild symptoms. For those who do develop symptoms, the symptoms usually appear between six weeks and six months after infection. Many people with chronic hepatitis C infection do not develop symptoms until years, sometimes even decades, later.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Hepatitis C is diagnosed with blood tests.

How is hepatitis C treated?

Hepatitis C infection can be treated with special drugs that fight viruses. Persons infected with hepatitis C infection should be vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B, two other viruses that cause liver damage, if they are at risk for those infections. People with hepatitis C should not drink alcohol, use illegal drugs, or take certain medications or dietary supplements that may cause more damage to the liver. Ask your doctor about treatment options and steps you can take to protect your liver.

How can I prevent hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

People are at risk for having hepatitis C if they:

- Have injected street drugs or shared drug injection equipment, even just once.
- Have received a blood transfusion, blood products, or an organ transplant before July 1992.
- Have had many sexual partners, especially if they did not use condoms.
- Are health care workers (like doctors or nurses) who may be exposed to blood or needles.
- Are babies born to mothers who have hepatitis C.
- Have been on kidney dialysis.

The best way to prevent hepatitis C infection is to avoid contact with the blood of infected people.

Other ways to prevent the spread of hepatitis C include the following:

- If you shoot drugs, never share works with anyone. Wash your hands before and after injecting drugs. Don't share cocaine or snorting straws, since these can get blood on them too. Find out about treatment programs that can help you stop using drugs.
- Use a latex condom every time you have sex.
- Only get tattoos or body piercings from places using sterile equipment.
- Health care workers and people who clean up in hospitals or other places where needles or sharps are found should follow standard (universal) precautions with **every** patient.
- Never share razors or toothbrushes.
- If you have hepatitis C, don't donate blood, sperm, or organs.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic.
- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under "government").
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at: (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850, or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/hepc>
- The MDPH Hepatitis C Hotline at 1-888-443-hepC (4372).