

Hepatitis C virus (HCV)

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be affected. Heavy alcohol use, toxins, some medications, and certain medical conditions can cause hepatitis, however hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Although all types of viral hepatitis can cause similar symptoms, they are spread in different ways, have different treatments, and some are more serious than others.

How is hepatitis C spread?

The hepatitis C virus is usually spread when someone comes into contact with blood from an infected person. 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 persons will get hepatitis C.
- **Healthcare exposures**
Although uncommon, people can become infected when healthcare professionals do not follow the proper steps needed to prevent the spread of bloodborne infections.
- **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.

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.

Many people who live with HCV do not know they have it.

What is hepatitis C virus (HCV)?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus. When someone is first infected with the hepatitis C virus, they can have a very mild illness with few or no symptoms or a serious condition which requires hospitalization. For unknown reasons, fewer than half of people who get hepatitis C are able to clear, or get rid of, the virus without treatment in the first 6 months after infection.

Most people who get infected will develop a chronic, or lifelong, infection. Left untreated, chronic hepatitis C can cause serious health problems including liver disease, liver failure, liver cancer, and even death.



Symptoms

Many people with hepatitis C do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. If symptoms occur with a new infection, they usually appear within 2 to 12 weeks, but can take up to 6 months to develop. Symptoms include:

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

People with chronic hepatitis C can live for years without symptoms or feeling sick. When symptoms appear with chronic hepatitis C, they often are a sign of advanced liver disease.

A test for hepatitis C is the only way to know if you have it.

A blood test called a hepatitis C antibody test can tell if you have been infected with the hepatitis C virus—either recently or in the past. If you have a positive antibody test, another blood test is needed to tell if you are still infected or if you were infected in the past and cleared the virus on your own.

It is recommended that you get tested for hepatitis C if you:

- Are 18 years of age or older
- Are pregnant (get tested during each pregnancy)
- Currently or have ever injected drugs
- 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 person with hepatitis C

Hepatitis C can be cured.

How is hepatitis C treated?

Treatments are available that can cure most people with hepatitis C in 8 to 12 weeks. 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.

Can hepatitis C be prevented?

Yes. Although there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C, there are ways to reduce the risk of becoming infected.

- ➔ Avoid sharing or reusing needles, syringes or any other equipment used to prepare and inject drugs, steroids, hormones, or other substances.
- ➔ Do not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood, even in amounts too small to see, such as glucose monitors, razors, nail clippers, or toothbrushes.
- ➔ Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting.

For more information

Talk to your healthcare provider or visit epi.health.utah.gov/hepatitis-c/

Additional resources:

- American Liver Foundation
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Hepvu.org
- Nvhr.org