Hepatitis C Virus

What is hepatitis C Virus (HCV)?
Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV). It can range in severity from mild illness lasting few weeks to a serious lifelong illness. Hepatitis C virus can be either "acute" or "chronic." Acute hepatitis C virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first six months after a person is exposed to the virus. For most people, acute infection leads to chronic infection. Chronic hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, or even death. Hepatitis C virus is the most common chronic bloodborne infection in the United States.

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

How is hepatitis C spread?
Hepatitis C is spread when blood from a person infected with the hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. Most people become infected with the hepatitis C virus by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs.

People can become infected with the hepatitis C virus during such activities as:
- sharing needles, syringes, or other equipment to inject drugs
- needle stick injuries in healthcare settings

Less commonly, a person can also get hepatitis C virus infection through:
- sharing personal care items that may have come in contact with another person's blood, such as razors or toothbrushes
- having multiple sexual contacts
- having sex, in a long-term monogamous relationship, with a person infected with the hepatitis C virus
- being born to a mother who has hepatitis C

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?
Approximately 70-80% of 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

Most people with chronic hepatitis C do not have any symptoms. However, if a person has been infected for many years, his or her liver may be damaged. In many cases, there are no symptoms of the disease until liver problems have developed. In persons without symptoms, hepatitis C is often detected during routine blood tests to measure liver function and liver enzyme levels.

Are certain people at risk of getting hepatitis C?
Some people are at increased risk for hepatitis C, including:

- current injection drug users (the most common way HCV is spread in the U.S.)
- past injection drug users, including those who injected only one time or many years ago
- hemodialysis patients or persons who spent many years on dialysis for kidney failure
- people who received body piercing or tattoos done with non-sterile instruments
- healthcare workers injured by needle sticks
- HIV-infected persons
- children born to mothers infected with the hepatitis C virus

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?
There is no medication available to treat acute hepatitis C infection. Doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids.

People with chronic hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease and evaluated for treatment. The treatment most often used for hepatitis C is a combination of two medicines, interferon and ribavirin. However, not every person with chronic hepatitis C needs or will benefit from treatment. In addition, the drugs may cause serious side effects in some patients.

How can hepatitis C be prevented in the healthcare setting?
The delivery of healthcare has the potential to transmit hepatitis C virus (HCV) to both healthcare workers and patients. Outbreaks of HCV infection have occurred in outpatient settings, hemodialysis units, long-term care facilities, and hospitals, primarily as a result of unsafe injection practices, reuse of needles, finger stick devices and syringes, and other lapses in infection control. To prevent transmission of bloodborne pathogens, healthcare workers should adhere to recommended standard precautions and fundamental infection control principles, including safe injection practices and appropriate aseptic techniques.

For more information regarding hepatitis C, visit the following resources:

- http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HCV/index.htm
- http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/ChooseC.htm
- http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/Settings/HealthcareSettings.htm
- http://www.cdc.gov/injectionsafety/unsafePractices.html