

Hepatitis C Outbreak Frequently Asked Questions
NH Department of Health and Human Services
August 20, 2012

ABOUT HEPATITIS C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection that is carried in a person's blood. It infects a person's liver causing inflammation that can result in damage to the liver tissue.

Where can I get more information about hepatitis C?

For more information about this virus, you can visit:

- The New Hampshire DHHS website at www.dhhs.nh.gov
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis
- Call the NH DHHS Division of Public Health Services, Bureau of Infectious Disease Control at 603-271-4496.

SIGNS, SYMPTOMS, AND TREATMENT

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people who develop hepatitis do not have symptoms at all. Some people may have symptoms such as loss of appetite, abdominal pain, dark urine, yellowing of the skin, light-colored stools, diarrhea, fatigue, or nausea.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?

Some people with new infection will "clear" the virus, meaning their immune system fights it off without therapy (20%), but others will become chronically infected (80%). Some people with chronic infection can be treated with effective antiviral medications. This therapy is often managed by specialists in gastroenterology or infectious disease.

What are the long-term effects of hepatitis C?

In people with chronic infection, the disease can progress slowly over decades. The main outcome is damage to the liver. Some people will never have complications from chronic hepatitis C infection but others can develop liver cirrhosis, liver failure, or (rarely) liver cancer or death.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine available for hepatitis C.

HEPATITIS C INFECTION

How is hepatitis C passed from person to person?

Since it is a blood-borne disease, there has to be direct transmission of blood from one person to the blood of another. Some examples include sharing needles during recreational (illegal) drug use, tattooing with a dirty needle, or contact with a non-sterile piece of medical equipment such as a used syringe. Sexual transmission of hepatitis C is possible but very uncommon. Casual contact or contact between household or family members is not considered a risk for transmission.

Is it possible that I could have hepatitis and be infectious but not know it?

Yes, it is possible since many people don't show any symptoms or don't recognize them as any specific illness.

Who is at risk of having hepatitis C?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, certain groups of people are more likely to have hepatitis C virus infection and should be tested, including:

- Anyone who has ever injected illegal drugs
- People who were treated for clotting problems with blood products made before 1987
- People who received an organ transplant or blood transfusion before July 1992
- People who have ever received long-term hemodialysis treatment
- People with signs or symptoms of liver disease (e.g., abnormal liver enzyme tests)
- Persons with known exposures to hepatitis C, such as:
 - Health care workers after needle sticks involving blood from a patient with hepatitis C
 - Recipients of blood or organs from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis C
- Anyone born between 1945 and 1965 (this is a new recommendation in 2012)

HEPATITIS C AND HEALTHCARE

How are you determining the cause of the outbreak?

The Division of Public Health has determined that the cause of this outbreak is most likely drug diversion is defined by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as the recreational use of prescription drugs. When this has occurred in prior outbreaks in healthcare settings, hospital workers admitted to stealing and injecting patient narcotics. If this unclean needle or syringe is then used on a patient, it can result in transmission of certain bloodborne infections to patients, including hepatitis C.

The ongoing public health investigation is to identify patients who may have been exposed to hepatitis C at Exeter Hospital. We will continue to update the public as more information becomes available.

Has what has happened at Exeter Hospital happened anywhere else?

This is the first known outbreak of hepatitis C in a New Hampshire healthcare facility, but similar situations have occurred in other states. The CDC has compiled 13 reported healthcare associated hepatitis C outbreaks in the United States during 2008–2011.

Is drug testing of healthcare workers required in New Hampshire?

No, there is no mandatory drug testing of healthcare workers in New Hampshire at this time.

TESTING

I understand the NH Department of Health and Human Services recommends more people be tested now. Who is recommended for testing at present?

Anyone who had a procedure at one of the main inpatient Exeter Hospital Operating Rooms (OR) (not day surgery) or who was treated in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) between the dates of April 1, 2011 and May 25, 2012 should get tested for hepatitis C infection. This is in addition to the previous recommendation for all people treated in the Cardiac Catheterization Lab and its recovery room between October 1, 2010 and May 25, 2012.

If I wasn't contacted or don't fit the testing criteria how can I be sure that I'm not at risk?

Based on our most recent information we have expanded testing to some ICU and operating room patients, as defined above. We do not currently have evidence that others may also be at

risk, but given the complex nature of this investigation, it is possible that we may add to these testing recommendations and we will announce this publicly through the media and our website if it becomes necessary.

Why are you now testing patients who were in other parts of the hospital?

Because we have recently learned that the arrested healthcare worker may have been present in other areas of the hospital where he may have diverted drugs.

Why did it take so long to decide to test these other areas?

We are using all available information and resources to make our testing recommendations. If new information about infection risk is discovered, we will adjust our testing recommendations.

How can I get tested if I fit the criteria but don't get contacted?

We sent letters in June to those who were at risk from exposure to the Exeter Hospital Cardiac Catheterization Laboratory. We have also sent letters on August 3rd to the new group of people who are being recommended for testing based on their possible OR or ICU exposure to let them know they are in this group and what their testing options are. We have also contacted those people to schedule appointments at our DPHS clinics. If you think that you meet the new testing criteria and would like to contact us to discuss further, please call us at 603-271-4496. However, if you believe you may have been exposed to hepatitis C elsewhere or you are interested in having a screening test, contact your healthcare provider to discuss getting tested.

Where can I be tested now since the clinics are over?

The DPHS clinics concluded on August 18th. However, if you were a patient in the OR, ICU or Cath Lab during the time periods listed above, you can have your blood drawn at one of the sites below. You may also contact Exeter Hospital to schedule an appointment by calling 603-580-6124.

Location	Address	Dates
Portsmouth Hospital Collection Station	55 High Street Suite 104 Hampton	Monday – Thursdays 8AM – 4PM (closed 1–1:30 PM)
Portsmouth Hospital Collection Station	Pease International Tradeport 26 Manchester Square Portsmouth	Monday – Thursdays 8AM – 4PM (closed 1-1:30PM)

Rapid tests will not be used at these locations.

You may also choose to have your healthcare provider test you and send the blood sample to the NH Public Health Labs for testing and you will not be charged for the testing. The healthcare provider needs to call the Lab first at (603) 271-4661 and use the Hepatitis C Virus Antibody Test Requisition Form available on our website at <http://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/cdcs/hepatitisc/hepc-investigation.htm>.

Who is going to pay for the testing?

If you fit the above criteria and attend a blood draw location listed above you will not be charged. If you choose to go to your healthcare provider, they may charge you for the visit and/or for the testing.

How accurate is the test?

The test for hepatitis C is very accurate, although no test is perfect.

Who is actually doing the testing related to this outbreak?

The NH Public Health Laboratories are performing the tests related to the Exeter Hospital outbreak. Some of the samples will also be sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for further testing.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES

I am worried about this situation. Is there someone I can talk to about this?

One resource that is available is NH community mental health centers in Portsmouth (603-431-6703) or in Exeter (603-772-2710). They are available 24/7 and they have an answering service for off hours to help direct calls to the right person.

What is the State of New Hampshire doing to ensure this won't happen again?

The NH Division of Public Health Services is investigating to determine the number of people involved with this outbreak and the exact mechanism of transmission. The NH Department of Health and Human Services' Health Facilities Certification Unit licenses and inspects many healthcare facilities including hospitals. We will continue to update the public on this ongoing investigation and when it is complete, NH DPHS will create a public report document to outline our investigation findings and recommendations.

DPHS has held two community meetings at Exeter High School on June 15th and July 26th to update the community about this investigation and to be available to the public for questions or concerns.

What is Exeter Hospital doing to fix this problem to make sure this doesn't happen again?

Exeter Hospital reported the initial four cases of hepatitis C infection as soon as they found out about them to the NH Division of Public Health Services. Since then, they have been working with DPHS to ensure the safety of other patients and help determine the cause of these cases. If you have additional questions for Exeter Hospital, please contact them at 603-580-6124.

Why can't public health officials provide more information about this outbreak and the investigation?

We understand that many people would like more details of the ongoing investigation, however the details of the investigation are confidential. This information is held confidentially pending conclusion of the investigation. Even upon conclusion of the investigation, much of the information will not be publicly released to protect individuals' privacy. Because this is also a criminal investigation, the information must also be handled confidentially so as not to jeopardize the process of justice.

Where can I get more information?

You can learn more about hepatitis C by visiting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis. To speak with a public health professional at the NH Department of Health and Human Services, call 603-271-4496.