

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus (HCV) that causes liver damage. It is estimated that 4.1 million (1.6%) Americans have been infected with HCV, of whom 3.2 million are chronically infected.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C infection?

Symptoms of acute hepatitis C can include jaundice (yellowing of the skin), fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, low-grade fever, pale stools, dark urine, and generalized itching. It is important to remember, however, that up to 80% of people who are infected with hepatitis C do not exhibit any symptoms and may not know they have it. If a person is exposed to HCV, symptoms may appear about 6 to 8 weeks later, but this time period can vary from person to person. Most HCV-infected people carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Approximately 70% of chronically infected persons develop liver disease.

How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV is spread mainly through exposure to infected blood and blood products. There are several ways a person has increased risk of becoming infected, including:

- Sharing needles or “works” when using illegal injecting and intranasal drugs
- Receiving a blood transfusion or organ donation from someone who is infected
- Being born to an infected mother
- Receiving long-term hemodialysis treatment

- Needlestick with a dirty needle (i.e., tattooing, ear piercing)
- Needlestick or sharps exposure on the job
- Sexual contact with someone who is HCV positive, though this is uncommon

Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

Certain groups of people who are more susceptible to HCV infection 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
- Children born to HCV-positive mothers
- Household contacts of persons who are HCV positive
- Anyone born between 1945 and 1965

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

This can be done with a blood test.

Is there treatment for hepatitis C infection?

Yes, there is combination antiviral therapy available to patients who meet certain criteria. However, treatment depends on many different factors, so it is important to see a doctor experienced in treating hepatitis C. New and improved treatments are available that can cure hepatitis C for many people.

What are the long-term complications of hepatitis C?

After many years, chronic HCV may lead to liver cirrhosis, or rarely, to liver cancer. Some cases of HCV may require a liver transplant.

People with HCV infection should avoid alcohol, and certain medications. Follow recommendations given by your health care provider.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?

No, but people with hepatitis C should be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B to avoid any additional liver damage from those viruses.

How do I prevent being exposed to HCV?

Do not use injecting illegal drugs, do not share needles, do not share personal items (e.g., razor, toothbrush) with an infected person, and use a latex condom to decrease the risk of catching or passing HCV through sexual contact.

For specific concerns regarding hepatitis C, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Communicable Disease Control at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis or the NH Department of Health and Human Services website at www.dhhs.nh.gov.