

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C, also referred to as HCV, is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that 3.9 million Americans (1.8 percent) have been infected with HCV.

How can you get hepatitis C?

The hepatitis C virus is spread by contact with the blood of an infected person, which can happen through the sharing of needles used to inject illegal drugs and through sexual contact. Most HCV infections are the result of injecting drugs. HCV can also be transmitted during child delivery, but not through breast-feeding. Health care workers are at risk for contracting the virus if they accidentally prick themselves with a contaminated needle.

The virus is not spread through food, water, or casual contact, so mothers or fathers with the virus can still engage in normal activities with their family, such as cooking, hugging, and kissing (as long as there are no open sores in the mouth).

How do you know if you have hepatitis C?

Many people (80 percent) infected with hepatitis C show no signs or symptoms and are not aware that they carry the virus. However, there are several blood tests that can determine if you have been infected. Your doctor may order just one or a combination of these tests. The two main tests are the enzyme immunoassay (EIA) and the enhanced chemiluminescence immunoassay (CIA). If either of those tests are positive, they are typically confirmed with another test called the recombinant immunoblot assay (RIBA).

Hepatitis C prevention tips

- Do not share personal care items that might have blood on them (e.g., razors and toothbrushes).
- Do not shoot drugs. If you do shoot drugs, never share needles, syringes, water, or “works.” And more importantly, stop using and get into a treatment program.

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- Consider the risks if you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing. You might get infected if the tools have someone else's blood on them or if the artist or "piercer" does not follow good health practices.
- Always use latex condoms to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.
- If you are HCV positive, do not donate blood, organs, or tissue.

What are the physical consequences of living with hepatitis C?

Physical symptoms of hepatitis C include jaundice, fatigue, the swelling of legs or abdomen, bleeding, and changes in weight or appetite; however, not all patients experience these symptoms. Over time, hepatitis C can lead to scarring of the liver, known as cirrhosis. In some cases, those with HCV develop liver cancer. Liver transplants may become necessary for some with HCV.

Can you live with hepatitis C?

If you have hepatitis C, you can still live a long, rewarding life. HCV is not easily transmitted within families, and the infection progresses slowly. Studies have shown that consuming alcohol can hasten the progression of hepatitis C to cirrhosis of the liver. Staying clean and sober will help protect your health from increased damage from HCV. A healthy diet (which helps prevent liver disease), exercise, and naps will also combat the fatigue caused by HCV.

There is no cure yet for HCV, but there are some drugs—such as interferon and ribavirin—that can reduce the amount of the virus in the blood. Patients must decide whether the benefits of these drugs outweigh the potential side effects.

Web resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

The CDC website offers facts on transmission, prevention, and treatment of hepatitis C.