

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HEPATITIS C

In the Clinic
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What Is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by a virus. It is the most common blood infection in the United States and is now easily cured with medications. If undetected and untreated, hepatitis C can cause major damage to the liver over time and increase your risk for liver cancer.



Am I at Risk?

Hepatitis C can spread from one person to another through blood or bodily fluids. You are at highest risk for infection if you inject drugs and share needles.

Other factors that increase your risk include:

- Having a blood transfusion before 1992
- Having long-term kidney dialysis
- Being born to a mother with hepatitis C
- Having unprotected sex with multiple partners
- Being a man who has unprotected sex with other men or has HIV
- Tattooing and piercing with unsterilized equipment
- Being a health care worker who is exposed to contaminated needles or bodily fluids

What Are the Signs and Symptoms?

When first infected with hepatitis C, most people do not have any symptoms. In fact, it can take years to feel sick after you have been infected.

Some symptoms of chronic liver disease from hepatitis C include:

- Feeling tired
- Loss of appetite
- Itching
- Weakness
- Jaundice (yellow skin or dark urine)
- Leg swelling
- Rashes

How Is It Diagnosed?

- Because few people have symptoms when they are first infected, doctors now recommend that everyone older than 18 years be tested for hepatitis C at least once. Pregnant women should be tested during each pregnancy. If you have any of the risk factors mentioned above, you should be tested for hepatitis C every year.
- Your doctor will order a blood test to see if you have hepatitis C. If you have the virus, you will need additional blood tests. These will help your doctor learn more about your hepatitis C and see how well your liver is working.
- You may need to have pictures taken of your liver to see if it is damaged. Noninvasive

imaging options, like ultrasound, are available. Sometimes, if these tests do not provide enough information, you might need a liver biopsy. For this test, a small needle will be used to take a sample of your liver for testing.

How Is It Treated?

- It is important to treat hepatitis C as soon as it is diagnosed. This will limit the damage to your liver and decrease your risk for liver cancer and death. However, even if you have had hepatitis C for many years, you can still be cured with treatment.
- There have been many changes in the way hepatitis C is treated. New antiviral medicines are safe and well tolerated and can almost always cure hepatitis C. "Cure" means that the virus is no longer in your body 3 months after you finish your medications.
- Talk to your doctor about which antiviral medications are right for you. Ask which ones are covered by your insurance plan because these medications can be expensive.
- The medications are taken by mouth for about 2-3 months. If your liver is damaged or you have other infections, you might need a longer treatment course.
- You should avoid alcohol. Even moderate drinking may further damage your liver when you have hepatitis C.
- Talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated against other types of hepatitis (A and B), pneumonia, and flu.

Questions for My Doctor

- Should I be tested for hepatitis C?
- Is my liver damage reversible?
- What are the risks or side effects of antiviral medication?
- Will any of the medications I'm currently taking interact with my hepatitis C medications?
- What should I do to protect others from catching hepatitis C?
- Will my insurance plan cover the cost of my treatment? If I can't afford my medications, are there programs that can help me?

For More Information



National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases

www.niddk.nih.gov/health-information/liver-disease/viral-hepatitis/hepatitis-c

MedlinePlus

<https://medlineplus.gov/hepatitisc.html>