

Hepatitis C

WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is an inflammation of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. Approximately four million Americans are infected, with about 36,000 new infections each year. The hepatitis C virus can infect a person who has been exposed to an infected person's blood. The virus can stay in the body, usually for a lifetime, and eventually can cause chronic, serious liver diseases.

WHAT BEHAVIORS COULD PUT ME AT RISK?

You are at risk if you share needles, razors, toothbrushes or other items that could be contaminated with blood. You are at risk if you received a blood transfusion prior to 1992 or clotting factors before 1987. You are at risk if you work with contaminated blood or are exposed to blood. Chronic dialysis is also a risk factor. Although the likelihood of infection from sexual contact is low, it is possible. Thus, if you have sex with an infected partner or if you have had multiple partners, you do have a risk factor for hepatitis C. Even though these risk factors are known, it is still unclear why a significant minority who do not have any of these risk factors have hepatitis C.

SHOULD I BE TESTED?

You should be tested for hepatitis C if you:

- received blood products before 1992 or clotting factors before 1987
- have ever shot drugs
- have received chronic hemodialysis
- are a health care or public service worker and have been exposed to hepatitis C - contaminated blood
- your infant should be tested if you are a mother and you have hepatitis C.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT HEPATITIS C?

Practicing good hygiene and safer sexual behaviors is a good first step. You can help avoid infection by using these precautions:

- Don't share toothbrushes, razors, or other personal care items that may be contaminated with blood.
- Don't ever shoot drugs. If you can't stop, don't ever share needles, syringes, or works, and get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

- If you are a healthcare worker, always follow barrier protection recommendations and handle sharps with care.
- Consider the potential health risks of tattooing and body piercing, if done by a practitioner who could be using tools contaminated by someone else's blood or who doesn't wash their hands.
- Hepatitis C isn't spread very often by sex, but it has happened. If you have had multiple sexual partners, get immunized against hepatitis B and use safer sex practices also to decrease the likelihood of other dangerous diseases such as HIV.
- The risk of perinatal infection is 5-6%. There is no evidence that the virus is transmitted through breast milk.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is less likely than the other hepatitis viruses to cause serious illness at first (only one quarter of the people infected actually develop symptoms); but about 85% of those infected develop chronic liver disease.

At least 20% of those with chronic infection develop cirrhosis of the liver and one to five percent will get hepato-cellular carcinoma.

Early symptoms of viral hepatitis include:

- fatigue
- tenderness in the upper right abdomen
- sore muscles & joints
- loss of appetite
- an altered sense of taste & smell
- nausea, vomiting & diarrhea
- low-grade fever
- malaise

Later symptoms can include:

- jaundice - abnormally yellow skin and eyes caused by bile entering the blood
- darkened urine;
- light-colored or gray stool

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Although health providers use information about a person's symptoms, health history and behaviors to help make a diagnosis, only blood tests can confirm the diagnosis and pinpoint which type of hepatitis a person has.

HOW IS HEPATITIS C TREATED?

There are medications that are used to treat some people with hepatitis C. These drugs can decrease the amount of virus present while they are being taken, and occasionally these drugs can cure. They are wonder drugs for the fortunate people that they work in, but they don't work in everyone. If you have hepatitis C, you need to stay current on treatment options, as there is much research afoot and excellent reason to remain optimistic about future, better treatments.