

**FACT SHEET****Acute and Carrier Information****HEPATITIS C****(Non A-Non B, Hep C, HCV)****What is Hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a virus that infects the liver.

**Who is at risk for Hepatitis C?**

IV drug users, persons receiving blood products (such as transfusions) or organ transplants prior to July 1992, persons receiving clotting factors before 1987, healthcare workers, chronic hemodialysis patients, infants born to infected mothers, and persons with multiple sexual partners are at risk for hepatitis C. The mode of transmission is unknown in about 10% of cases.

**How do people get Hepatitis C?**

The hepatitis C virus is most often spread through contact with infected blood. Sharing needles for injection drug use is a very common way people become infected. Having sex with an infected person, living in the household with someone who has hepatitis C, and being born to an infected mother are other ways people could become infected, although the risk of contracting the virus in these ways is not as common as having a blood exposure. The role of sexual transmission is not clear, but high-risk sexual activity (multiple partners or a history of STDs) is a risk factor. In 1992 a test for hepatitis C was developed and is used to screen every unit of donated blood, so that getting a transfusion is now considered safe. There is no evidence that hepatitis C can be transmitted by casual contact, through foods, or by coughing or sneezing. There is no evidence of hepatitis C being transmitted through breast milk.

**What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?**

Symptoms may include being very tired, nausea, vomiting, fever, stomach pain, tea-colored urine, and yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice). Most people infected with hepatitis C will have only a few mild symptoms and may never know they were infected. However, all infected people can spread the virus, even when they do not feel sick. Only about 25 - 35% of infected persons will develop symptoms however.

**How long can an infected person spread the virus?**

The virus can be spread from one or more weeks before symptoms begin and throughout the time the person has the virus. About 15% of infected people will recover from the infection and get rid of the virus within a few weeks or months. Approximately two thirds of people infected with hepatitis C however will not get rid of the virus and will have the virus for the rest of their lives. As long as a person has the virus, that person can transmit it to other people.

**How is Hepatitis C diagnosed?**

Infection by the hepatitis C virus can be determined by a simple blood test that detects antibodies against HCV. Your healthcare provider may ask that additional diagnostic tests be run.

**Can a blood test tell if I am no longer infected?**

Other blood tests are available to check for the actual levels of the virus in the blood, and a liver biopsy could be done to determine the extent of liver damage done by the virus.

**How is Hepatitis C treated?**

At this time, long-acting pegylated interferon, or a combination of pegylated interferon with Ribavirin are being used to treat hepatitis C. Depending on the type of hepatitis C (genotype) a person has, treatment can last from 24-48 weeks. Effectiveness rates vary from 50-80% depending on the type of hepatitis C, as well as how well the person is able to tolerate the treatment program. Treatment for Hepatitis C is a rapidly changing field and a patient must consult with a medical provider to get the best treatment options.

**What can I do to take care of myself if I have hepatitis C?**

- Avoid alcoholic beverages and street drugs. They will damage your liver.
- Avoid taking prescription or over-the-counter medicines, dietary supplements, or herbs unless your doctor tells you it is OK. Certain types of medications or supplements (e.g. acetaminophen) can damage your liver.
- Eat a healthy diet (low fat, non-spicy sometimes helps) and get plenty of rest. If you are vomiting after eating, tell your doctor.

- See your doctor and follow the doctor's instructions carefully. Your doctor will want to do blood tests occasionally to see how your liver is working.
- If you get pregnant, tell your doctor you have hepatitis C.

**What can I do to protect others?**

- Cover all cuts and sores with a bandage.
- Throw away all items that have your blood on them in plastic bags and close the bag tightly.
- Wash your hands well after touching your blood or body fluids.
- Clean up blood spills with paper towels. Next, clean the area with a bleach solution (1 part bleach to 100 parts water or one-quarter cup bleach per gallon of water).
- Talk with your sex partner about your hepatitis C and discuss the possibility of using a latex condom during sex. Although the risk of transmitting the virus sexually is low, it is possible to transmit hepatitis C this way.
- Do not share any items that may have your blood on them (even if you cannot see the blood), such as toothbrushes, razors, and needles used for ear-piercing, tattooing, or drug use or other drug use items.
- Do not donate blood, plasma, semen, or body organs.