

Facts & DETAILS

Hepatitis C

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What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV).

How common is hepatitis C?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 3.5 million people have chronic hepatitis C in the United States. Around 3,000 acute hepatitis C cases were reported in 2016.

How do people become infected?

HCV is spread person to person when blood from an infected person enters the body of someone who is not infected. HCV is spread through sharing needles or any other equipment to inject drugs; needle sticks or sharps exposures on the job; blood transfusions or organ transplants (primarily before 1992); having sex with an infected person; sharing personal items contaminated with infectious blood; or from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

What are acute and chronic hepatitis C?

Acute HCV infection is a short-term illness that occurs in the first 6 months of exposure to virus.

Chronic HCV infection is a long term illness that occurs when the virus stays in a person's body. Chronic HCV infection can last a lifetime if not treated.

What are the signs and symptoms of hepatitis C?

About 80% of people infected with HCV do not know they are infected because they do not look or feel sick. Symptoms that could appear include fatigue, headaches, joint aches, muscle aches, nausea, jaundice, loss of appetite, and/or abdominal pain.

Approximately 75-85% of people infected with HCV develop chronic disease. Chronic hepatitis C severity varies between individuals, but around 70% will develop chronic liver disease, 20% will develop cirrhosis (liver scarring), and 5% will develop liver cancer.

How long can a person spread hepatitis C?

After exposure, symptoms usually appear in two weeks to six months (average six to seven weeks). Someone with hepatitis C is contagious as long as the HCV remains in their blood.

Who is at risk for hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C testing is recommended for people born between 1945 and 1965, received donated blood or organs before 1992, have ever injected drugs, were treated for a blood clotting problem before 1987, received long-term hemodialysis, have abnormal liver tests or liver disease, are HIV positive, have been exposed to blood from a person with hepatitis C, or were born to a hepatitis C-positive mother.



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How is hepatitis C treated?

Chronic hepatitis C can be treated with direct-acting antiviral medications. This treatment results in elimination of the virus in 80-95% of patients after 12-24 weeks of treatment.

Acute hepatitis C can clear on its own in about 25% of people. Acute hepatitis C treatment is similar to the chronic hepatitis C treatment. However, optimal acute hepatitis C treatment and when it should be started remains uncertain.

How can you prevent hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. Prevent infection by doing the following:

- Do not use intravenous (IV) drugs. Never share drugs, needles, or syringes.
- Do not share personal care items that might have blood on them (e.g., razors, toothbrushes).
- If you are a healthcare or public safety worker, always follow routine barrier precautions and safely handle needles and other sharps.
- 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.
- If you are having sex with more than one partner, use latex condoms correctly every time you have sex.
- If you are HCV positive, do not donate blood, plasma, organs, or tissue.

For More Information:
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