



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Boston Public Health Commission
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Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a type of virus that attacks the liver. The hepatitis C virus is found in the blood and body fluids of infected persons.

How does hepatitis C spread?

The hepatitis C virus can spread whenever blood (or fluids containing blood) from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. This could occur when infected blood enters through a break in the skin, by sharing needles or “works” when “shooting” drugs or by sharing items such as toothbrushes, razors or anything else with blood on it from a person who has hepatitis C virus. Although not common, hepatitis C can be spread during sexual contact or from an infected mother to her baby during birth. The hepatitis C virus is not spread by hugging, sneezing, coughing, breast feeding or sharing eating utensils.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Many people have mild symptoms or no symptoms at all but can still pass the virus on to others. Common symptoms of hepatitis C infection include fever, lack of energy, nausea, vomiting, stomach pain and jaundice (yellow color in the white part of the eyes and dark urine). Symptoms can begin as soon as six weeks or as long as 6 months after exposure to the virus.

How serious is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C infection can be very serious for some people. Most people who get hepatitis C will carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Persons with hepatitis C can have liver damage but do not feel sick from the disease. Some persons with liver damage due to hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver failure, which often takes many years to develop. Others have no long term effects.

Who is at high risk for getting hepatitis C?

You should get tested for hepatitis C if:

- You ever injected street drugs, even if you experimented a few times many years ago.
- You were treated for clotting problems with a blood product made before 1987.
- You received a blood transfusion or a solid organ transplant before July 1992, or you were notified that you received blood that possibly contained hepatitis C.
- You were ever on long-term kidney dialysis.

What is the treatment of hepatitis C?

A person with hepatitis C should check with their doctor to see if treatment is appropriate. In some cases a healthcare provider may recommend a combination of two drugs called interferon and ribavirin. Currently, studies are being done to see if treatment with the combination drugs interferon and ribavirin can help children get rid of the virus.

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How can a person with hepatitis C take care of their liver?

- See your healthcare provider regularly.
- Do not drink alcohol.
- Check with your healthcare provider before taking any new medicines, including over the counter and herbal medicines.
- Make sure to get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

How can hepatitis C be prevented?

- If you have hepatitis C do not donate your blood, body organs, or other tissue or sperm.
- If you have hepatitis C do not share toothbrushes, razors or other personal care articles that might have your blood on them.
- Cover you cuts and open sores.
- While the risk of spreading hepatitis C through sexual contact it low, you can reduce your risk by using a condom or other barrier protection especially if you have multiple sexual partners.
- Do not shoot drugs. If you do, seek treatment to try and stop; if you can't, reduce your risk by not sharing needles or equipment (including cotton, filters, caps, spoons, cookers and alcohol swabs) every time you inject. If you snort drugs, don't share straws since these can get blood on them also.
- Healthcare staff and custodial staff in hospitals or places where needles or sharps are used should follow standard (universal) precautions for every patient.

**For more information, please contact
Boston Public Health Commission
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