



Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (HCV) is an infection caused by a germ (virus) that can cause the liver to swell. Most people who are infected with HCV cannot clear the infection on their own and are infected for many years without knowing it. Over time, chronic HCV can lead to serious liver damage.

How does hepatitis C spread?

HCV is spread when blood or other body fluids containing blood from an infected person enter the body of another person. This can happen through sharing needles or items like toothbrushes and razors or when infected blood enters through a cut in the skin. Although not common, HCV can be spread by sexual contact or from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Some people will have no symptoms or not have symptoms for many years. However, in some people, symptoms may appear as soon as 6 weeks after exposure or months after exposure to the virus. Symptoms can include:

- Whites of the eye and skin turn yellow
- Fever
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Flu like symptoms
- Tiredness
- Dark brown urine
- Stomach pain
- Grey-colored stools (feces)

How serious is hepatitis C?

HCV can be very serious for some people. Persons with HCV can have liver damage but not feel sick from the disease. Some persons with liver damage due to HCV may develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver failure, which often takes many years to develop. Others have no long-term effects.

Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

You should get tested for HCV if:

- You have ever injected illegal drugs, even if it was only once many years ago.
- You were born between 1945 through 1965.
- You have ever “snorted” illegal drugs.
- You shared tattooing or body piercing needles or ink.
- You received clotting factor concentrates made before 1987.
- You received blood transfusions or solid organ transplants before July 1992.
- You were ever on long-term kidney dialysis.
- You are a healthcare worker who has had a needle stick injury.
- You are a recipient of blood or organs from a donor who later tested positive for HCV.
- You are HIV positive.
- You have signs or symptoms of liver disease (such as abnormal liver enzyme tests).

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Children born to HCV infected mothers should also be tested. Be sure your child's healthcare provider tests your child for HCV until the child is at least 18 months old.

Can hepatitis C be treated?

Treatments are available for people with HCV. Talk to your healthcare provider to find out which treatment is best for you. If you do not have a healthcare provider, call the Mayor's Health Line at 617-534-5050 to assist you in finding a healthcare provider near you.

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.
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

How can hepatitis C be prevented?

- If you have HCV, do not donate your blood, body organs, or other tissue or sperm.
- If you have HCV, do not share toothbrushes, razors or other personal care articles that might have your blood on them.
- Cover any cuts or open sores you may have.
- Reduce your risk of spreading HCV through sexual contact by using a condom.
- Do not inject medications not prescribed by a healthcare provider. If you use street drugs, 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). If you snort drugs, don't share straws since these can get blood on them and transmit infection.
- Healthcare staff and custodial staff in hospitals or places where needles or sharps are used should follow standard precautions for every patient.

