

# FAQs

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). The virus causes the liver to form tiny scars, which, over time, join together and begin to prevent blood from flowing freely through the liver. It is a blood-borne virus.

## Why is the liver important?

Just as you can't live without a heart or brain, you can't live without a liver. Your liver transforms food into energy, sends nourishment through the blood to cells, stores nutrients, fats, and vitamins, and makes proteins needed to help blood clot. Your liver also acts as a filter to clean wastes and poisons, like alcohol, drugs, caffeine, preservatives, and other toxins from the blood.

## How serious is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is serious for some people but others may have no long-term effects. Most people who get hepatitis C carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Some people with liver damage due to hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis, liver cancer or liver failure, which may take many years to develop. Hepatitis C is the leading cause of liver transplants.

## How do you get Hepatitis C?

The hepatitis C virus is present in the blood and is spread when infected blood from one person enters the body of another. The sharing of needles and drug paraphernalia while injecting drugs is the most common risk factor. About 30% of people who have been infected with HIV (AIDS) are also infected with HCV. You are also at risk if you have received a blood transfusion or organ transplant prior to 1992, blood-clotting products prior to 1987, or long-term hemodialysis. Healthcare workers exposed to accidental needle sticks and children born to hepatitis C-positive mothers can also become infected. Sexual transmission of hepatitis C does occur, but it is not easily spread in this manner. The risk of sexual transmission increases if you have had multiple sex partners.

Blood contamination on items that pierce the skin or come into contact with non-intact skin or mucous membranes also pose a risk. Such items may include piercing and tattooing equipment, drug snorting equipment, military inoculation guns, razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, etc.

Hepatitis C is NOT spread through casual contact or by swimming pools, toilets, and water fountains. It is NOT spread by coughing, sneezing, hugging, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or through breastfeeding (unless nipples are cracked and bleeding).

## Who is at risk for Hepatitis C?

Those at high risk of infection should be tested for the hepatitis C virus. People at high risk of Hepatitis C virus infection include the following:

- Users of injected drugs
- People who received clotting factors before 1987
- Dialysis patients
- People with HIV
- People who have abnormal liver enzyme test results
- People who received blood or who had an organ transplant before 1992
- People who received blood from someone who later tested positive for the hepatitis C virus
- Health care workers who may have been exposed to Hepatitis C-positive blood (for example, workers who have been stuck with a needle used on a person with Hepatitis C)

## What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Many persons with hepatitis C have no symptoms at all but some will notice mild to severe symptoms such as: "Flu-like" symptoms, abdominal discomfort, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, fatigue, weight loss, and sometimes yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice).

## How soon do symptoms appear?

If symptoms appear, they can appear anywhere from 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure, with an average of 6-9 weeks. Many infected people will never have symptoms.

## Why should I be tested for Hepatitis C?

Early diagnosis is important so that you can be checked for liver damage and receive treatment if you need it. Treatment is most effective before severe liver damage has occurred. You can also learn how you can protect your liver from further harm and how you can prevent the spread of HCV to other people. If you think you may have been exposed to the virus or have signs or symptoms of liver disease such as an abnormal liver enzyme test, you should talk to your doctor about getting tested.

## What blood tests will I need to have done to diagnose Hepatitis C?

Your doctor can confirm if you're infected with the hepatitis C virus by performing blood tests that look at several different things such as:

- **Antibodies:** Doctors use the ELISA and RIBA tests to detect the presence of antibodies that the body produces against the hepatitis C virus. If this test is positive, it means you have been exposed to the virus but does not tell if you still have the virus
- **Viral load:** These tests can tell whether the virus is present and how much is in your blood.

Treatment is available for those with HCV, however, it does not eliminate the virus in everyone. Be sure to discuss treatment options with your doctor. A combination therapy of pegylated interferon and ribavirin is the current treatment, and new treatments to be used with this combination are on the horizon. A healthy diet, lifestyle, and exercise program will help you feel better. You should reduce alcohol consumption and do not start any new medicines or use over-the-counter herbal or other products without a doctor's ok. You may need to get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B and you must learn how to prevent spreading the virus to others. Find support.

## How can I protect myself from getting Hepatitis C?

Always wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after blood exposure. Wear gloves when cleaning up blood. Wash blood-contaminated surfaces with soap and water and then disinfect with a bleach and water solution (1 part bleach to 10 parts water). Healthcare professionals should always follow routine barrier precautions and safely handle needles and other sharps.

Injection drug users should make sure that needles, syringes, and works are sterile and never shared. Never draw drugs out of a supply that has been mixed in a shared and possibly contaminated container. When getting a tattoo or body piercing, make sure the artist uses sterile needles, tools, and ink and follows good health practices. Practice safer sex by using latex condoms. Do not share personal items that may have your blood on them such as razors, nail files, and toothbrushes.