

Hepatitis C Fact Sheet

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV)

HCV is in blood, semen, other body fluids, and tissues of persons infected by HCV

Most of HCV-infected persons (75 to 85%) carry the virus for the rest of their lives; **such persons can spread the virus for many years.** Up to 20% of patients with chronic HCV develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer, some as late as 20 years after HCV infection. In severe cases, liver transplantation is the only treatment.

Symptoms to look for in acute HCV infection:

- Yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice)
- Feeling tired
- Stomach pain
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting

Many persons have no symptoms of HCV infection. If a person is exposed to HCV, symptoms may appear about 6 to 8 weeks later, but this time period can vary among individuals. Some persons find out they are infected after lab tests are done (for example, after giving blood).

HCV is spread mainly by exposure to blood and blood products. Persons at high risk of being exposed to HCV include:

- Users of illegal injecting drugs
- Recipients of blood transfusions, plasma, organs, and other tissues
- Babies born to infected mothers
- Persons treated with long-term hemodialysis
- Persons with multiple sexual partners

Certain groups of persons should be tested for hepatitis C virus infection

- Persons notified that they received blood from an HCV positive donor
- Persons who received transfusions or solid organs prior to July 1992
- Persons who received clotting factor concentrates prior to 1987
- Chronic hemodialysis patients
- Persons who ever injected illegal drugs, even if many years ago
- Health care and public safety workers after exposure to HCV-positive blood
- Children born to HCV-positive women

A doctor will decide what tests are needed. Routine testing is not recommended for the general public, health care/emergency medical/public safety workers, pregnant women, or household (non-sexual) contacts of HCV-infected persons.

Treatment is available for some people with HCV

Two drugs, interferon and ribavirin, can be used to treat HCV. The treatment is effective in 10-40% of persons. Doctors will help decide who should be treated and can explain how to protect the liver, for example, by not drinking alcohol and avoiding certain medicines.

Prevent hepatitis C by avoiding exposure and practicing good hygiene

Injecting drug users should not share needles or works with others. The use of latex condoms may decrease the risk of catching or passing HCV through sex.

Persons with hepatitis C should get vaccination against hepatitis A and hepatitis B