



Hepatitis C

Information for Injection Drug Users

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What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a general term for inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis C refers to a virus that can cause the liver to become inflamed. Hepatitis C is one of several viruses that affect the liver. Right now, we know about Hepatitis A, B, C, D, E and G. Alcohol and drug use, prescribed medications, chemicals and toxins, and autoimmunity (when the body's immune system attacks itself) can also cause Hepatitis.

Hepatitis C causes liver inflammation (swelling) by infecting liver cells and replicating (making copies of the virus). These copies of the virus go on to infect other liver cells. When the immune system attacks the infected cells, the liver becomes inflamed. This damages the liver and sometimes leads to cirrhosis – scarring of the liver.

There are an estimated four million people infected with Hepatitis C in the United States. Most new cases are among people who inject drugs. According to studies, most people who have injected drugs have Hepatitis C.

What if I have Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C acts slowly – most people won't have any symptoms for 10 to 30 years after being infected. Some people (about one in seven) clear the Hepatitis C virus out of their body within a few weeks after becoming infected, but most people are chronically infected – the virus stays in their body for a long period of time. Most people with Hepatitis C develop some liver damage over time, though it's not necessarily serious. However, up to one in five people will develop serious scarring of the liver, known as cirrhosis. A small percentage develops liver cancer. Advanced liver disease can lead to liver failure and be life-threatening.

Transmission

Hepatitis C is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact – blood from one person getting into another person's body. Risks include:

- Sharing needles and other drug injection equipment (like cookers and cotton)
- Blood transfusion/blood products received before 1992
- Possibly sharing snorting straws, toothbrushes, razors, manicure implements
- From mother to baby at birth (about 5 % risk; higher if the mother is HIV+)
- Sexually (though the risk of sexual transmission is small for Hepatitis C)
- Body piercing and/or tattooing with unsterilized needles or shared inkwells

Most new Hepatitis C infections are among people who inject drugs. If you inject drugs, avoid sharing needles. If you need to use a needle that someone else has used, first clean it out with a full-strength bleach and then rinse it out with water. Leave the bleach in the needle for as long as possible – at least two minutes. Hepatitis C can also be transmitted through sharing cookers or spoons, cotton and filters, and water. If you're shooting up with someone else, make sure everyone's using a clean needle, or else mix your shots in separate cookers using separate sources of water. Clean out used cookers and spoons. Remember that Hepatitis C can live for several days outside of the body.

Sexual transmission of Hepatitis C is uncommon. If you're concerned about the risk of sexual transmission, consider using a condom. Use ample lubrication for anal sex to reduce tearing of rectal tissue, and/or condoms. Dental dams or Saran Wrap can be used for oral sex on a woman having her period.

Symptoms of Hepatitis C

Most people don't automatically start to feel sick when they first get infected with Hepatitis C. That's why people can have Hepatitis C for decades without knowing it. Some people develop symptoms right away, but usually no symptoms appear unless the liver is seriously damaged, ten to thirty years after infection.

Symptoms include:

- Weight loss
- Low-grade fever
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Stiff or aching joints
- Pain in the right side, over the liver area
- Dark brown urine
- Pale feces
- Fatigue and/or depression
- Jaundice (the whites of the eyes and skin become yellowish)

How can I find out if I have Hepatitis C?

If you think you have been at risk for Hepatitis C infection, you may consider getting tested. Think about your reasons for wanting to know whether you have Hepatitis C or not, how the information would affect you, and how you would use that information. There are two tests for Hepatitis C. The first test looks for antibodies to the virus, and the second test looks for the presence of the actual virus. Both tests are available through doctors.

If you have Hepatitis C, there are a lot of things you can do to keep your liver healthy. Get vaccinated against Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B. Hepatitis A in particular can be dangerous for people who already have Hepatitis C. Take care to avoid reinfection with Hepatitis C – some strains are harder to treat.

Drinking alcohol greatly increases the risk of developing cirrhosis.

Maintain a nutritional, balanced diet, and avoid fried foods and food with high salt, sugar or fat content.

Some vitamins and herbs may be helpful in strengthening your liver.

Talk to a doctor about medical options. There are tests to monitor how your liver is working and whether the virus has done any damage to the liver. Some people choose a treatment which combines two drugs – alpha interferon and ribavirin. While this treatment has been effective for a lot of people, it can have serious side effects and doesn't work for everyone. Talk to your doctor as well as friends and family members, and look for other people with Hepatitis C or support groups to help you weigh your choices.

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