



HEPATITIS C VIRUS (HCV)

What is Hepatitis?

"Hepatitis" means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by toxins, certain drugs, heavy alcohol use and bacterial and viral infections.

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV) which is found in the blood of persons who have the disease.

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood or bodily fluids containing the virus of an infected person enters the body of a person not infected. Infection can occur when diabetes lancets, toothbrushes, razors, needles and other drug "works" are shared. Sexual transmission can occur especially when blood is present, but is found to be low in long-term, monogamous (one long-term partner) relationships. There is no evidence that the virus is spread through casual contact such as hugging, shaking hands, sharing food, or sharing drinking glasses or eating utensils. HCV is *not* spread by coughing, sneezing or breastfeeding.

Who gets Hepatitis C?

Persons at *highest* risk for the HCV infection include:

- People who injected illegal drugs and shared needles or equipment, including those who injected once many years ago;
- People who had blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992, when sensitive tests for HCV were introduced for blood screening;
- People who received clotting factors made before 1987; and
- "Baby Boomers" who were born between 1945 and 1965.

Other persons at risk for HCV include:

- Long-term kidney dialysis patients;
- People who snort cocaine and use shared drug equipment;
- People with high-risk sexual behavior, multiple partners, and who are infected with a sexually transmitted disease;
- People who share toothbrushes, razors and diabetes lancets with a family member or friends who are HCV-infected;
- People who receive a tattoo or body piercing in prison;
- Infants born to HCV-infected mothers; and
- Healthcare workers who are exposed to a needle stick from an infected HCV patient.

Contact the Hepatitis Prevention Program for more information: (302) 744-1050

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What are the symptoms of HCV infection?

Approximately 20 percent of those exposed to HCV develop symptoms such as jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes), fatigue, dark-colored urine, stomach pain, loss of appetite and nausea. The other approximate 80 percent show *no* signs of illness and it can be 10-15 years before they are diagnosed with HCV. After the initial infection, 15-20 percent will recover and clear the virus, but the majority, 75-85 percent, will become chronically infected. Approximately 70 percent of persons chronically infected will develop liver disease that can result in liver cancer and death. HCV is the number one reason for liver transplants.

When and how long is a person able to spread the Hepatitis C virus?

A person who tests positive for HCV should be considered potentially contagious.

What is the treatment?

Hepatitis C anti-viral drugs are FDA approved for treatment of persons with HCV. Current combination drug therapy, using pegylated interferon and ribavirin, can rid the virus of up to 50 percent of the people infected with genotype 1, the most common type in the United States, and 80 percent of the people with genotype 2 or 3. It is important to find a physician who is an expert in treating HCV. As of 2012, many more anti viral drugs are being studied to add to the number of approved drugs used to combat HCV.

How can persons with HCV reduce their risk of chronic liver disease?

Persons with HCV should not drink alcohol. They should discuss their condition with their physician before taking any new medications, over-the-counter medications and herbal medications; and prior to receiving Hepatitis A and B vaccines.

How can the spread of HCV be prevented?

Prevent the spread of HCV by practicing these healthy behaviors:

- Do not shoot drugs. If you do, stop and get into a treatment program. If you cannot stop, NEVER share needles, syringes, water or "works." Get vaccinated against Hepatitis A and B. There is *no* vaccine for HCV.
- Do not share needles if you are injecting steroids or drugs.
- Do not share personal items such as razors, lancets and toothbrushes because they might have blood on them.
- Weigh the risk of getting a tattoo or body piercing. You might become infected if the artist or piercer does not follow good health practices such as using new needles and inkpots for each client.

For more information:

Visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/c.

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