

HEPATITIS C FACT SHEET

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

Hepatitis C can be transmitted when blood from an HCV-infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. As examples, HCV is spread through sharing needles or "works" when injecting drugs, through needlesticks or sharps exposures on the job, or from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

Hepatitis C can be both a short-term ("acute") illness, but also an ongoing ("chronic") infection that gradually damages the liver.

About 6 to 8 weeks after exposure to HCV, about one in ten newly infected persons become ill with "acute hepatitis C". Symptoms or signs of acute hepatitis C are:

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

Nine out of ten recently infected persons will have no symptoms.

Most HCV-infected persons (about six to eight in ten) will develop a chronic infection ("chronic hepatitis C"). Unless treated, the virus can be found in their blood and continues to attack the liver. Persons who have chronic hepatitis C can spread the virus to others. However, studies show that most persons (around two thirds) with chronic hepatitis C don't know that they are infected.

Some persons with chronic hepatitis C find out they are infected when they have routine blood tests, or when they donate blood. Others don't know they are infected until after 20 - 30 years or more. By that time, the infected liver has been so badly damaged that it cannot function properly. For every 100 persons with untreated chronic hepatitis C, about 10 - 20 persons will develop liver cirrhosis (severe liver scarring) and from 1 - 5 of these will develop liver cancer. With such serious liver damage, a liver transplant might be needed. In the United States, more liver transplants are now done for HCV-caused liver damage than for any other reason.

People at increased risk of being infected with HCV are those who:

- Ever used illegal injection drugs (even if only once or just a few times, long ago);
- Received clotting factors made before 1987;
- Were ever on hemodialysis for more than six months;
- Received blood and/or solid organs/tissue transplants before July, 1992;
- Were born to HCV-infected mothers;
- Have had multiple sexual partners and/or
- Were notified that they received blood from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis C.

People should be tested for hepatitis C virus infection if they:

- Are in one or more of the increased-risk categories above;
- Have undiagnosed liver problems; or
- Are health care or public safety workers with a known exposure to blood.

Persons with concerns about HCV exposure or infection should consult with their healthcare provider, who will decide what tests might be needed.

Treatment is available for some people with HCV

Two drugs, peg-interferon and ribavirin, can be used to treat HCV. The combination of these two drugs can be effective in over 50% of those treated, depending on the genotype (genetic make-up) of the virus. A healthcare provider will decide who should be treated.

An HCV-infected person can protect the liver by:

- Not drinking alcohol;
- Avoiding certain medicines and chemicals;
- Living a healthy lifestyle which includes good nutrition and the right amount of exercise and sleep;
- Getting vaccinated to prevent infection with hepatitis A & B;
- Not eating raw shellfish.

Everyone can help prevent spreading or getting HCV

- **IF** you don't know if you might have HCV infection, but you do have one or more of the increased-risk factors above, **GET TESTED!**
- **IF** you already have HCV, to prevent spreading it:
 - **DON'T** inject illegal drugs. Get into treatment if you are using. (People who continue to inject illegal drugs eventually have a 90% chance of becoming co-infected with HIV);
 - **DON'T** share needles or works with others if you do continue to use;
 - **DON'T** donate blood, organs or tissue;
 - **DO** cover your cuts and sores.
- **IF** you don't have HCV:
 - **DON'T** inject illegal drugs. Get treatment if you do;
 - **DON'T** share needles or works with others if you do continue to use;
 - **DO** use a latex condom if you have sex with more than one partner;
 - **DON'T** use another person's toothbrush, razor, clippers or other personal care items that might have blood on them;
 - **IF** you are thinking of getting a tattoo, **DO** consider that HCV can be transmitted by a sharp object (like a needle) or a medium (like ink) contaminated with the blood of someone who has HCV; and

DO protect your liver by wise choices about your behavior

THERE IS NO VACCINE TO PROTECT AGAINST HCV

THE BEST PROTECTION IS PREVENTION