



Health Concerns

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by a virus called the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Over time, the infection causes swelling and damage to the liver.

How do people get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is spread through contact with blood, or bodily fluids containing blood, of a person infected with the HCV virus. You can get HCV from sharing any object that carries infected blood. These include:

- needles used for injecting drugs, tattooing or body piercing
- razors, scissors or toothbrushes
- other equipment used for injecting or snorting drugs, such as straws, spoons, cookers and filters
- transfusion of blood products before 1990

HCV can also be spread through unprotected sex with a person infected with HCV.

A small percentage (5%-10%) of women who have hepatitis C may also pass it on to their babies during pregnancy or at birth.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people who get infected with hepatitis C do not have any symptoms.

Some people may get sick for a short time with tiredness, joint pain, stomach discomfort and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the white parts of the eyes) within six months of infection. Most people will recover from these symptoms within a few weeks. However, even after the symptoms disappear, the virus continues to live inside the body and causes damage to the liver over time.

After 10 or more years of being infected with HCV, people may develop scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) and have an increased risk of developing liver cancer.

How do I find out if I have hepatitis C?

There are blood tests available that can check whether you have been exposed to HCV. Talk with your doctor or nurse to find out more about these tests.

What can I do if I have hepatitis C?

The liver is an important organ that regulates and process many nutrients, vitamins, minerals and chemicals in the body. It also produces important proteins and stores energy for the body's function. The hepatitis C virus damages the liver and affects its ability to function properly. Therefore, it is very important to keep the liver healthy.



You can help your liver stay healthy by:

- Maintaining a healthy lifestyle by eating a balanced diet and getting regular exercise, rest and sleep.
- Avoiding or reducing substances that are harmful to the liver, including alcohol, street/recreational drugs, tobacco and some medications.
- Getting vaccinations to protect yourself from other forms of hepatitis (A and B). There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.
- Work with your doctor to monitor the health of your liver. This can be done with regular blood tests, ultrasound scans and, if necessary, a liver biopsy (taking a very small piece of the liver for examination).

There are medications available to treat hepatitis C. The medications usually prescribed include a combination of two antiviral drugs, interferon-alpha and ribavirin, for 6 to 12 months, which can help clear the infection in some people. However, the treatments have certain side effects and may not be suitable for everyone with hepatitis C. Talk with your doctor about possible treatment options for you.

What other things should I be careful about?

If you have hepatitis C, you can pass on the virus to others.

To avoid infecting other people:

- Do not donate blood, organs or semen.
- Do not share your razor or toothbrush.
- If you use drugs, do not share needles or other drug-use equipment. Be aware that even cleaning the equipment with bleach may not prevent hepatitis C transmission.
- Tell your doctor, nurse and dentist that you have hepatitis C.
- Practice safer sex by using a condom.

What if I have both hepatitis C and HIV?

Hepatitis C and HIV may affect each other in many ways.

Some studies show that people with both infections may develop AIDS-related complications sooner. Therefore, all of the previous suggestions for reducing harm and maintaining health are even more important if you have both infections.

Research also suggests that people with both infections may develop cirrhosis more quickly and may respond differently to drugs used to treat HIV.

Having both infections (being co-infected) makes the treatment of both conditions more complicated because many of the drugs used to treat HIV can cause damage to the liver. As a result, not everyone with both HIV and HCV infections receives treatment for both of these conditions at the same time. When and what you are treated with depends on the stage of each infection and the level of damage to your liver. Talk with your doctor about treatment options that are right for you.

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