



Hepatitis C



What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious disease caused by a virus that attacks the liver. The virus, which is called Hepatitis C virus (HCV), can cause lifelong infection, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, liver failure and even death.

How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. Hepatitis C virus is spread through sharing needles or “works” when shooting drugs, through needle sticks or sharps exposures on the job, or from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth. Less commonly, a person can also become infected with Hepatitis C by sharing personal care items, such as razors or toothbrushes, or by having sex with an infected person.

Symptoms of Hepatitis C:

Symptoms of HCV can develop 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure to the virus. There may be little to no symptoms in the early stages of infection, or symptoms may be mild (tiredness, nausea, headache and/or loss of appetite). More serious symptoms include fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, light colored feces, dark colored urine, and occasionally jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin). Many people never develop symptoms, however, can have chronic liver disease, including cirrhosis and liver cancer. In fact, HCV infection is often not recognized until asymptomatic persons are identified as HCV-positive when screened for blood donation or when elevated liver enzyme levels are detected during routine examinations.

How is Hepatitis C diagnosed?

A blood test for Hepatitis C infection is recommended for current or former injection drug users, blood or solid organ transplant recipients before July 1992, persons receiving long term dialysis, persons who received clotting factor concentrates produced before 1987, people with signs of liver disease, or children born to women with Hepatitis C. Adults born between 1945 and 1965 should receive one-time testing for Hepatitis C even without certainty of risk factors.

How is Hepatitis C treated?

There are anti-viral drugs available to treat chronic Hepatitis C. These medications are only available by prescription. Knowing you have Hepatitis C can help you make important decisions about your health. Successful treatments can eliminate the virus from the body and prevent liver damage, cirrhosis, and even liver cancer.

How can Hepatitis C be prevented?

- If you have Hepatitis C, do not donate blood, body organs, other tissue, or sperm.
- Do not share toothbrushes, razors or other personal articles that may have blood on them.
- Cover your cuts and open sores.
- If you want to lower the risk of Hepatitis C transmission to your sex partner, use barrier precautions such as condoms.
- Stop drug use and get into a treatment program.
- If you cannot stop drug use, then do not share syringes, needles, or other drug paraphernalia (works).
- Consider the risks involved with tattooing and body piercing. You can become infected if the tools are contaminated with blood or the practitioner does not follow good health practices.
- Health care workers and other employees who are exposed to blood and body fluids should follow universal precautions.
- Although there is no vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C, persons who are infected with Hepatitis C should receive Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccines.

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