

CHRONIC HEPATITIS C



General Information

What should I know about chronic Hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis C is a serious liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis C virus.
- About 75% of people who get infected with the Hepatitis C virus develop a chronic or long-term infection.
- Approximately 3.2 million people in the United States have chronic Hepatitis C, but most don't know they are infected.
- People with Hepatitis C often have no symptoms. Many people can live with an infection for decades without feeling sick.
- Chronic Hepatitis C can cause serious health problems including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver cancer, and even death.
- Hepatitis C is a leading cause of liver cancer and the leading cause of liver transplants.
- New treatments are available for Hepatitis C that can get rid of the virus.



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How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood from a person infected with the Hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. This can happen through:

- **Blood transfusions and organ transplants.** Before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992, Hepatitis C was commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants.
- **Injection drug use.** Most people become infected with Hepatitis C by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. It is possible to have gotten Hepatitis C from injecting drugs, even if just once or many years ago.
- **Outbreaks.** While uncommon, poor infection control has resulted in outbreaks in outpatient health care and residential care facilities.

While rare, sexual transmission of Hepatitis C is possible. Having a sexually transmitted disease or HIV, sex with multiple partners, or rough sex appears to increase a person's risk for Hepatitis C. Hepatitis C can also be spread when getting tattoos and body piercings in unlicensed facilities or with non-sterile instruments. Approximately five percent of infants born to infected mothers will get Hepatitis C. Still, some people don't know how or when they got infected.

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What are the symptoms of chronic Hepatitis C?

Many people with chronic Hepatitis C do not have symptoms.

- Symptoms of chronic Hepatitis C can take decades to develop, although damage to the liver can silently occur during this time.
- When or if symptoms do appear, they are often a sign of serious damage to the liver.
- Symptoms for Hepatitis C can include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, grey-colored stools, joint pain, and jaundice.
- The only way to know if you have Hepatitis C is to get specific blood tests.

How is chronic Hepatitis C diagnosed?

Hepatitis C is diagnosed with different blood tests. Typically, a person first gets a Hepatitis C Antibody Test, which looks for “antibodies” to the Hepatitis C virus. Antibodies are chemicals released into the bloodstream when a person becomes infected. The antibodies remain in the bloodstream, even if the person clears the virus.

If the Hepatitis C Antibody Test is reactive or positive, an additional, follow-up test is needed. This test looks for the presence of the Hepatitis C virus. If the additional test is positive, this means a person currently has the virus in his or her blood.

If both blood tests are positive, additional tests are needed to confirm that a person is chronically infected.

Who should get tested for chronic Hepatitis C?

Testing for chronic Hepatitis C is recommended for certain groups, including people who:

- Were born from 1945 through 1965
- Received donated blood or organs before 1992
- Have ever injected drugs, even if it was just once many years ago
- Have certain medical conditions, such as chronic liver disease and HIV or AIDS

How is chronic Hepatitis C treated?

Antiviral medication can be used to treat some people with chronic Hepatitis C, although not everyone needs or can benefit from treatment. For many, treatment can be successful and results in the virus no longer being detected in their blood.

People with chronic Hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease by a doctor experienced in treating the disease.

For more information

Talk to your health professional, call your health department, or visit www.cdc.gov/knowmorehepatitis.