

**Hepatitis C**

Fact Sheet

**What is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that ranges in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness that attacks the liver. It results from infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV), which is spread primarily through contact with the blood of an infected person.

**How do you know if you have HCV?**

Specific blood tests will diagnose if a person is infected with the virus.

**How is HCV spread?**

HCV is spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. For example, HCV is spread through:

* Sharing needles, syringes, or other equipment to inject drugs
* Needlestick injuries in health care settings
* Being born to a mother who has HCV

Less commonly through:

* Sharing personal care items that may have come in contact with another person’s blood, such as razors or toothbrushes
* Having sexual contact with a person infected with the hepatitis C virus

Hepatitis C is **not** spread through food or water or by sharing eating utensils, hugging, kissing, coughing, sneezing, or by casual contact.

**What are the symptoms of HCV?**

Sometimes a person with HCV infection has no symptoms at all.

If you have symptoms, they might include:

* Fever
* Fatigue
* Loss of appetite
* Nausea
* Vomiting
* Abdominal pain
* Dark urine
* Clay-colored bowel movements
* Joint pain
* Jaundice (yellow color in the skin or eyes)

**How long does it take for symptoms to occur after exposure to HCV?**

If symptoms occur, the average time is 6-7 weeks after exposure, but this can range from 2 weeks to 6 months. However, many people infected with HCV do not develop symptoms.

**What are the risk factors for HCV?**

You are at increased risk of HCV infection if you:

* are a current injection drug user (currently the most common way Hepatitis C virus is spread in the United States)
* are a past injection drug user, including those who injected one time only or many years ago
* received donated blood, blood products, and organs especially before 1992
* received a blood product for clotting problems made before 1987
* are a hemodialysis patient or spent many years on dialysis for kidney failure
* received body piercing or tattoos done with non-sterile instruments
* People with known exposures to the Hepatitis C virus, such as
  + Health care workers injured by needlesticks
  + Recipients of blood or organs from a donor who tested positive for the Hepatitis C virus
* are an HIV-infected person
* are a child born to a mother infected with the hepatitis C virus
* It is currently recommended that all those born between 1945 and 1965 be tested to determine if they were ever exposed and infected.

**What does the term "chronic hepatitis C" mean?**

Chronic hepatitisCis a long-term illness that occurs when the Hepatitis C virus remains in a person’s body. Hepatitis C virus infection can last a lifetime and lead to serious liver problems, including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer.

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**How can a person with HCV take care of his or her liver?**

* People with HCV should be monitored regularly by an experienced healthcare provider.
* They should avoid alcohol which can cause additional liver damage.
* They should check with their provider before taking prescription pills, nutritional supplements, and over-the-counter medications.
* They should check with their provider about vaccination against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

**If you are pregnant, should you be tested for HCV?**

No,getting tested for Hepatitis C is not part of routine prenatal care. However, if a pregnant woman has risk factors for Hepatitis C virus infection, she should speak with her doctor about getting tested.

#### What is the risk of a pregnant woman passing Hepatitis C to her baby?

#### Hepatitis C is rarely passed from a pregnant woman to her baby. About 4 of every 100 infants born to mothers with Hepatitis C become infected with the virus. However, the risk becomes greater if the mother has both HIV infection and Hepatitis C.

**Can I donate blood, organs, or semen if I have Hepatitis C?**

No, if you ever tested positive for the Hepatitis C virus (or Hepatitis B virus), experts recommend never donating blood, organs, or semen because this can spread the infection to the recipient.

**How long can HCV survive outside the body?**

HCV can survive outside the body at room temperature, on environmental surfaces, for at least 16 hours but no longer than 4 days.

**What do you use to remove HCV from environmental surfaces?**

You should clean up any blood spills - including dried blood, which can still be infectious – using a cleaning solution of one part household bleach to 9 parts water. Use gloves when cleaning up any blood spills.

**Where can I get more information?**

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting <http://www.mainepublichealth.gov>/hep.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> – is another excellent source of health information.