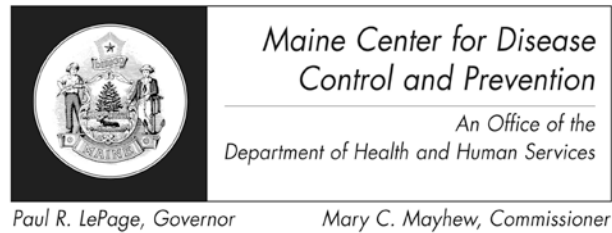


Hepatitis C

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 hepatitis C is 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.

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.