

Hepatitis C

The Facts About Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an extremely contagious bloodborne disease that can also be sexually transmitted.

How many people have hepatitis C?

More than four out of every five people with new hepatitis C infections develop chronic infections. It is estimated that four million Americans have evidence of having had hepatitis C at some point during their life.¹ In the past, a large percentage of people were infected when they received blood products during medical procedures. Improved blood donor screening has led to a dramatic drop in the annual number of new infections (from about 240,000 in the 1980s to 25,000 in 2001).¹ Injection drug use now accounts for nearly half of all new infections.

How does someone get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is primarily transmitted from people sharing needles when shooting drugs. Transmission can also occur if needles used for tattooing or body piercing are not properly sterilized and are then reused. Before 1992, when widespread screening of blood products became the norm, transfusions were a common mode of transmission. In the early 1960s, as many as one in every five transfused blood products was contaminated with Hepatitis C; now the risk is about one in 100,000.² One of every 30 infants born to mothers with hepatitis C is infected during the birth process.³ Hepatitis C can also be sexually transmitted. Multiple sex partners increase the risk for infection. Hepatitis C is not transmitted through the type of casual contact that occurs in a workplace.

What are the symptoms?

About three out of four infected people show no signs or symptoms of infection. Due to liver damage, an infected person may experience jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), severe fatigue, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting.

What are some of the long-term effects of a hepatitis C infection?

A significant number of people with hepatitis C have lifelong infections that can cause liver failure, cancer and death.

How does someone find out s(he) has hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C can be diagnosed through a variety of simple blood tests.

How is hepatitis C treated?

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C, although vaccination against hepatitis A and B is recommended to prevent any further damage to the liver. For the same reason, consumption of alcohol is not recommended for people infected with hepatitis C. There are a couple of drug therapies

available, but they tend to be expensive, have to be used for extended periods of time and can cause serious side effects, including depression. Even when taken diligently, the drugs are not always effective.

Am I safe if I consistently use a condom?

Studies are lacking, but given the way hepatitis C is transmitted, condoms would not be expected to eliminate your risk of infection, though they might reduce it some.

How can I avoid getting hepatitis C?

Don't shoot drugs. Never get a tattoo or body piercing from a place that does not have a current inspection certificate from your local health department. If you haven't had sex and don't shoot drugs, your chances of getting hepatitis C are considerably reduced. If you've already been sexually active outside a lifelong mutually faithful relationship (as in marriage), talk to your healthcare provider about getting you and your partner tested for STDs. Abstinence from sexual activity or lifetime faithfulness to one uninfected partner is the only certain way to avoid being infected sexually.

1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Viral Hepatitis C Fact Sheet. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/c/fact.htm>. Accessed July 22, 2003.

2 American Red Cross. Hepatitis C Lookback. Available at: <http://chapters.redcross.org/ca/norcal/phys/transfus/hepatitis.htm>. Accessed July 21, 2003.

3 Ferrero S, Lungaro P, Bruzzone BM, Gotta C, Bentivoglio G, Ragni N. Prospective study of mother-to-infant transmission of hepatitis C virus: A 10-year survey (1990-2000). *Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand*. 2003;82:229-234.

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