

Hepatitis C

FACT SHEET



Washtenaw County
Health Department

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the *hepatitis C virus* (HCV). The virus is found in the blood of infected people. Many persons who get hepatitis C will become chronically infected. More than half of those who are chronically infected will have liver damage and may eventually develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver tissue) and/or liver cancer. Cirrhosis and liver cancer usually take many years to develop.

What are the symptoms?

- Yellowing of the skin & eyes
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever
- Extreme fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Clay-colored bowel movements
- Dark urine
- Joint pain

Early symptoms of hepatitis C appear from 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure, usually within 4-12 weeks. But most people who are infected with HCV have no symptoms and can infect others without knowing it.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C virus is spread by direct contact with infected blood or body fluids, including blood transfusions. It can be spread through tattooing, body piercing, injecting drugs, needle-sticks, and rarely, through sexual contact. Pregnant women who are infected can pass the virus to their baby. The virus is **not** spread by shaking hands or by hugging.

You are at risk if you:

- Have ever (even just once) injected illegal drugs
- Have had a job that exposes you to human blood
- Were treated for clotting problems before 1987
- Received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992
- Have multiple sex partners
- Are a family member or housemate of an infected person
- Are infected with HIV

How is it prevented?

- There is currently NO vaccine for Hepatitis C.
- Don't share needles, toothbrushes, eating utensils or razors that could be contaminated with blood or body fluids.
- If you are a health care worker, follow routine barrier precautions; handle needles and other sharps safely.
- If a surface is contaminated with blood or body fluids, wear latex gloves and mop up or wipe with a disinfectant solution.
- Don't use IV drugs. If you do use IV drugs, stop and get into a treatment program. If you can't stop, NEVER reuse or share your drug works. Contact your local health department for more information on cleaning your works and needle exchange programs.
- If you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing, remember that you can get infected if the tools haven't been cleaned properly or if the artist doesn't wear clean gloves with each new customer.

HCV can occasionally be spread through sexual contact. Although this does not occur very often, consider protecting yourself by:

- Having sex with only one person who is only having sex with you.
- Using a new condom with a water-based lubricant every time you have sex.
- Knowing your sex partner's history of IV drug use.

If you have hepatitis C:

- Don't donate blood, plasma, body parts or sperm.
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B.
- Do not use alcohol or other substances that can harm your liver.

How is it treated?

- **For Acute Hepatitis C:** There is no current medication for acute Hepatitis C infection. Healthcare providers recommend rest, hydration and proper nutrition.
- **For Chronic Hepatitis C:** New treatments are becoming available. Please consult your medical provider.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.