

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness that attacks the liver. Hepatitis C can be either “acute” or “chronic.”

Acute Hepatitis C virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the Hepatitis C virus. For most people, acute infection leads to chronic infection.

Chronic Hepatitis C virus infection 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 is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread by contact with blood or body fluids from an infected person. The most common ways the virus is spread is through sharing needles used for injecting drugs or medication and accidental needle sticks among health care workers. It can also be spread through unsanitary tattooing or piercing practices, from receiving a blood transfusion prior to 1992, or from mother to child. It is spread rarely by sexual contact.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Only 20%-30% of newly infected people develop symptoms of acute illness. Symptoms of hepatitis C include loss of appetite, yellowing of the skin or eyes, fever, nausea and vomiting, extreme fatigue, stomach pain, dark-colored urine, clay-colored stools. Some people may have no symptoms.

Early symptoms of hepatitis C appear from two weeks to six months after exposure, usually within six to seven weeks. Most people who are infected with hepatitis C have no symptoms and can infect others without knowing it.

A person may be contagious one week or more before the onset of the first symptoms. Up to 85% of all cases may be infected longer than six months and become chronic carriers. This chronic infection may be lifelong. A person infected with hepatitis C may also be able to give the disease to others for the rest of their lives.

What is the treatment for Hepatitis C?

There is no medication available to treat acute Hepatitis C infection. Doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids.

Therapies for the treatment of chronic Hepatitis C are available. Each person should discuss treatment options with a doctor who specializes in treating hepatitis. People with chronic Hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease and evaluated

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for treatment. The treatment most often used for Hepatitis C is a combination of two medicines, interferon and ribavirin. However, not every person with chronic Hepatitis C needs or will benefit from treatment. In addition, the drugs may cause serious side effects in some patients.

Are there complications from Hepatitis C?

Chronic Hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer, or even death. It is the leading cause of cirrhosis and liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplantation in the United States.

How can Hepatitis C be prevented?

There is not a vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C. Some strategies to avoid contracting the virus include:

- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or other personal items that may become contaminated with blood or body fluids.
- Avoid direct contact with another person's blood or body fluids. If a surface is contaminated, wear latex gloves and clean with a water/bleach solution.
- Do not use illegal intravenous drugs and never share needles.
- If you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing, remember that you can get infected if the tools have not been cleaned properly or if the artist does not wear clean gloves with each new customer.
- Practice safer sex. A mutually faithful relationship with one other person is safest. Use a new latex condom every time you have sex.

How do I get more information on hepatitis C?

Calhoun County Public Health Department
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Website: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/C/index.htm>

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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