

# Hepatitis C

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## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease caused by a virus that affects the liver. Hepatitis C can lead to chronic liver disease, cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, and occasionally death. Individuals may be infected for a very long time (20-30 years) and not show any visible signs or symptoms. Most infected people will carry the virus their entire lives. Approximately 3.2 million people in the United States have chronic hepatitis C infection.

## How do I get hepatitis C?

You can get hepatitis C by direct contact with the blood of an infected person. You are at risk of contracting hepatitis C if:

- You have ever shared needles, syringes or drug works (even once a long time ago).
- You received transfusion of blood or an organ transplant prior to July 1992 or blood clotting products prior to 1987.
- You are on long-term hemodialysis.
- You have been exposed to infected blood in health care and other (tattooing and body piercing) settings.
- You have had unprotected sex with multiple partners.
- You have shared a toothbrush, razor or any other personal care product that might have had an infected person's blood on it.
- Your mother had hepatitis C when she was pregnant with you.

**Hepatitis C is NOT spread by breast-feeding, hugging, kissing, food or water, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, sneezing, coughing or casual contact. Persons should not be excluded from work, school, play, childcare, or other settings based on hepatitis C infection status.**

## Symptoms

Most (about 75%) people who have hepatitis C never notice any symptoms, but are still able to spread the virus. Symptoms may begin 2 weeks to 6 months (usually 4-9 weeks) after being exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Symptoms may include:

- Loss of appetite, stomach discomfort and nausea (sometimes with vomiting)
- Fatigue
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin or the whites of the eyes)
- Joint or muscle pain
- Brownish, tea-colored urine and gray or light-colored feces (stools)

## Prevention

- If you inject street drugs, never reuse or share needles, syringes, or drug works and never draw drugs out of the same container. If you do not have a new sterile syringe, make certain the syringe you use has been bleached thoroughly and rinsed with water.
- Use caution when handling items potentially contaminated with blood such as used needles, razors, tattooing equipment, ear/body piercing equipment, acupuncture needles, etc.
- Avoid obtaining tattoos or body piercing. If this is not possible, only use tattoo parlors and ear and body piercing shops that follow sterile procedures.
- Strongly consider using latex condoms during sexual intercourse.
- There is no preventive vaccine for hepatitis C at this time.

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# *Hepatitis C (continued)*

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## Treatment for hepatitis C

If you think you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus, see your health care provider immediately. There are treatments available; however, they are not always 100% effective.

### *If you have hepatitis C:*

- **DO NOT DRINK ALCOHOL.** Alcohol consumption rapidly increases liver damage.
  - Use latex condoms with your partner.
  - Do not share razors, toothbrushes or any other personal items that may contain your infected blood.
  - Do not donate blood, body organs, other tissues or sperm.
  - Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B if you have never been vaccinated for these before.
  - Learn more about how you can protect your liver.
  - Learn more about how you can prevent spreading hepatitis C to others.
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