

Hepatitis C

Information for Veterans

What is hepatitis?

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. Toxins, certain drugs, some diseases, heavy alcohol use, and bacterial and viral infections all can cause hepatitis.

Viral infections include hepatitis A (HAV), hepatitis B (HBV), and hepatitis C (HCV).

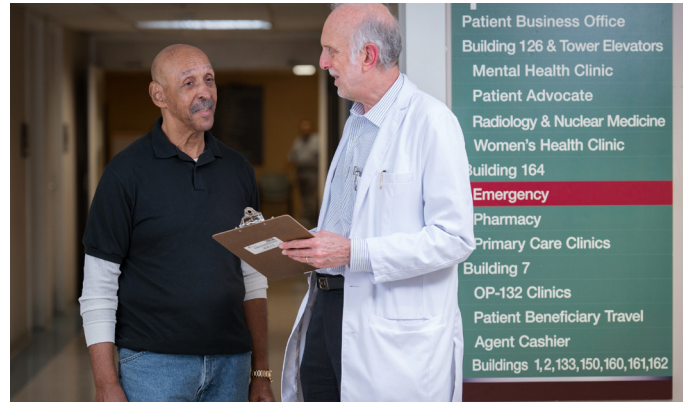
What is hepatitis C?

- ▶ It is a contagious liver disease that damages the liver.
- ▶ It can be acute, lasting only a few weeks, in 15-25% of individuals, resulting in a mild illness.
- ▶ It can be chronic (lifelong) unless successfully treated, resulting in liver damage, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), and liver cancer.
- ▶ It is spread through contact with the blood of an infected person.

People who have chronic HCV often have no symptoms and can live for many years without feeling sick.

Symptoms of acute HCV include fever, fatigue, nausea, abdominal pain, dark urine, jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), and joint pain.

Symptoms of chronic HCV include jaundice, gastrointestinal bleeding, ascites (swelling of the abdomen with fluid), and mental changes (confusion, sleepiness).



How many people have hepatitis C infection?

- ▶ 2.7-3.9 million people in the United States have chronic HCV.
- ▶ Veterans enrolled for care at VA have higher rates (5.4%) of HCV infection than the general U.S. population (1.8%).

What are the longterm effects of hepatitis C?

Of every 100 people infected with HCV, about:

- ▶ 5-85 will develop chronic HCV
- ▶ 5-20 will develop cirrhosis
- ▶ 1-5 will die from cirrhosis or liver cancer

In the United States, about 19,000 people die each year from HCV-related liver disease.

Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

Anyone who wishes to be tested. Testing for HCV is recommended if any of the following are true:

- ▶ Were born between 1945 and 1965
- ▶ Are a current or former injection drug user
- ▶ Received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992
- ▶ Are on hemodialysis treatment
- ▶ Are a Vietnam-era Veteran (dates of service 1964 through 1975)
- ▶ Work in health care or public safety and had a recent needlestick injury or mucosal exposure to HCV-positive blood
- ▶ Obtained tattoos or body-piercings in non-regulated settings
- ▶ Have ever shared equipment to snort drugs
- ▶ Had 50 or more sex partners
- ▶ Have current or past sex partner(s) with HCV infection
- ▶ Are infected with HIV
- ▶ Were treated for a blood clotting problem (received clotting factor concentrates) before 1987
- ▶ Have abnormal liver test results
- ▶ Were born to a mother infected with HCV
- ▶ Were incarcerated

Can hepatitis C infection be spread by sexual contact?

Yes, but the risk of getting HCV from sexual contact is believed to be low. The risk increases for those who have multiple sex partners, have a sexually transmitted infection, engage in "rough sex" or other activities that might cause bleeding, or are infected with HIV. More research is needed to understand how and when HCV can be spread by sexual contact.

About 15-25% of people who get HCV infection will clear the virus from their bodies without treatment and will not develop chronic infection.

Can hepatitis C infection be spread within a household?

- ▶ Yes, but this does not occur very often
- ▶ It can be spread by the blood of an infected household member
- ▶ If you live with someone who has HCV infection, you should not share personal care items such as razors or toothbrushes

How is hepatitis C infection treated?

- ▶ There are several oral medications for hepatitis C that have very high success rates with few side effects. In many cases, treatment is completed in 12 weeks.

Learn more

Contact your health care provider and ask about hepatitis C testing and treatment.

www.hepatitis.va.gov

www.cdc.gov/knowmorehepatitis

