What is hepatitis C?
Hepatitis C is a disease that affects your liver. It is caused by a virus, called the hepatitis C virus or HCV for short. According to government estimates, almost 4 million people in the United States have hepatitis C.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?
The symptoms of hepatitis C infection are often very mild. Some people with hepatitis C feel tired or have an upset stomach. Others may not have any symptoms at all. Even if you do not have any symptoms, hepatitis C is a serious illness. In most cases, once you have hepatitis C it never goes away. Over time, it can cause other health problems, such as cirrhosis (or scarring of the liver) and liver cancer. Finally, because it stays in your body, you can give hepatitis C to someone else.

How did I get hepatitis C?
You probably got hepatitis C by coming in contact with the blood of another person who is infected. Some of the ways this might have happened include the following:

• You had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992.
• You shared needles or works to inject drugs, even if it was only once, many years ago.
• You were on long-term kidney dialysis.
• You were a health care worker and had contact with blood on the job.

• Your mother had hepatitis C when she gave birth to you.
• You have had many sexual partners.
• You have had tattoos and body piercings.

How can I protect others from getting hepatitis C?
Hepatitis C is mainly spread through the blood. You cannot give hepatitis C to someone else by

• holding hands
• hugging or kissing
• sneezing or coughing
• sharing food or water
• sharing eating utensils
• sharing drinking glasses

To protect others from getting hepatitis C, follow these rules:

• Do not donate blood, body organs, tissues, or sperm.
• Do not let anyone else use your razor, toothbrush, or other personal care items.
• Cover open cuts or sores on your skin with a bandage until they have healed.
• Don’t inject drugs. If you shoot drugs, talk with your doctor about trying to stop. If you can’t stop, don’t ever share your needles or works with anyone else.
• Practice safe sex. Use a latex barrier, such as a condom (or rubber) every
time you have sex. Using condoms also reduces your chances of getting some sexually transmitted diseases.

Following these suggestions can also help protect you from other diseases, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis B virus (HBV). Talk with your doctor if you would like more information about these and other viruses.

How can I keep hepatitis C from causing serious damage to my liver?
The symptoms of hepatitis C infection are mild, but over time, the virus can damage your liver. You can help prevent this damage from getting serious by following your doctor’s advice. Here are some important tips to keep your liver healthy:

~ **Minimize your alcohol.** Alcohol damages your liver even when you are healthy. Drinking alcohol when you have hepatitis C makes the damage much worse. If you have cirrhosis, you should drink zero alcohol. It does not help to switch from “hard” liquor to beer, cider, or wine. If you need help to stop drinking alcohol, talk with your doctor.

~ **Get vaccinated against other hepatitis viruses.** Having hepatitis C does not mean that you can’t get other kinds of hepatitis. Talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated (or shots) to protect you from hepatitis A and B.

~ **Avoid taking medicines, supplements, or natural or herbal remedies that might cause more damage to your liver.** Check with your doctor before you take any natural or herbal remedy, supplement, prescription, or non-prescription medicine, especially if you are being treated for hepatitis C.

~ **Ask your doctor about tests to look for liver damage by hepatitis C.**
These could be blood tests or scans or a liver biopsy. A liver biopsy is not a requirement for hepatitis C treatment.

~ **Ask your doctor about treatments.**
Several antiviral medicines for hepatitis C exist and have high chances of cure and low side effects. Find out more about these treatments, and discuss any questions with your doctor.

~ **Get involved with organizations or support groups for hepatitis C in your area.**
If you need help finding one, ask your doctor for a list of local resources.

Who can I contact for more information?
Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/

For more information on hepatitis, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at: http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis

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Office of Public Health
Veterans Health Administration
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420
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