

Hepatitis C Prevention

Patient Information

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a virus that can be passed from person to person by blood, and enter the bloodstream. The virus then infects the liver cells, and over years, can lead to serious liver damage and sometimes to liver cancer. Some people with HCV may feel tired or have an upset stomach. Others may not have any symptoms at all, but they can still pass the virus to others. In the United States, more than 3 million people are living with HCV, and many of them don't know they are infected. Around the world, approximately 170 million people are living with HCV.

How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV is spread mainly through blood-to-blood contact. In other words, HCV is passed from person to person if someone without HCV has their blood exposed to the blood of someone who does have HCV.

How can I protect myself from infection with HCV?

The best way to prevent HCV infection is to avoid direct contact with other people's blood. At this point, there is no vaccine against HCV. To reduce the chance of blood-to-blood contact, never share items that could have had other people's blood on them, even when they look clean. Even a dried spot of blood that is too small to see can contain the virus.

What activities could put me at risk?

Drug use

- ▶ Talk with your health care provider or substance abuse treatment staff about trying to stop using drugs. If you can't stop, the following suggestions will help you protect yourself from HCV as well as HIV and other bloodstream infections.

▶ Injecting drugs

- Sharing needles, syringes, or any equipment used to inject drugs is one of the most common ways people get HCV. If you inject drugs, don't share your syringes, needles, filters, water, water containers, cookers, cottons, or ties with anyone else.
- Make sure the needles and injecting equipment you use are clean (or brand new) every time. Do not borrow needles or equipment from friends. Get sterile needles and syringes from a reliable source like a pharmacy or needle exchange program, if available.
- If you must reuse equipment, mark all your equipment so you know it's yours. Always clean your skin with alcohol, disinfectant, or soap and water before injecting.
- Use an extra, sterile syringe for splitting drugs using your own cooker and cotton.
- If you must share a syringe, clean it with bleach and sterile water.

▶ Snorting drugs

- Snorting drugs can cause bleeding on the inside of your nose. Use your own snorting straws and do not share with friends.

▶ Smoking drugs from crack pipes

- Smoking drugs from a crack pipe can cause your lips to crack or burn. Use your own pipe, or cover a shared pipe with your own rubber stem.



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Sex

- ▶ If you have more than one sex partner, practice “safer sex” all the time. Always use a condom, dental dam, or other latex barrier. Avoid “rough sex” and other activities that might cause bleeding.
- ▶ Receptive anal sex is the most risky activity for becoming infected with HCV.
- ▶ Get vaccinated for hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis A virus (HAV).
- ▶ Get tested and treated for HCV, HBV, HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STIs) such as chlamydia or herpes. Having an STI puts you at greater risk of also becoming infected with HCV and HIV through sexual contact.

Tattoos and piercings

- ▶ Only get tattoos and piercings done in professional, regulated studios that display a certificate from the state in which they are located.
- ▶ Make sure body artists are licensed in the state where they operate.
- ▶ Needles and ink pots should only be used on a single person. Tools that make contact with blood should be sterilized. Artists should wear single-use latex gloves.
- ▶ The risk of HCV infection is higher than average when tattoos and piercings are done in prison or by friends.

Sharing personal care items

- ▶ Do not use anyone else’s personal care items that could have blood on them, like razors, toothbrushes, toothpicks, or nail clippers.

Silicone, steroid, and hormone injections

- ▶ Only get injections if they are administered by a licensed care professional.
- ▶ Always use clean needles/syringes.

What should I do if I think I might have been exposed to HCV?

Get tested! HCV can be treated and cured. Find out as soon as possible so you can start treatment, prevent liver damage, and make sure you don’t spread HCV to others. Learn about the Veterans Administration HCV testing campaign at <https://www.hepatitis.va.gov/campaign-test-treat-cure.asp>. Other testing locations can be found at gettested.cdc.gov.

How can I get help if I have VHA benefits?

- ▶ Speak with your existing VA health care provider
- ▶ Contact the OEF/OIF Coordinator at your local VA Medical Center
- ▶ Contact your local Vet Center
<https://www.va.gov/directory>
- ▶ Call VA’s general information hotline (1-800-827-1000)
- ▶ Learn about drug use treatment options
<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/substanceabuse.asp>

Other Resources

Free, fast, and confidential HCV testing
<https://gettested.cdc.gov>

Drug treatment centers
<https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/> or 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Needle exchange programs <https://nasen.org/directory/>

Protecting yourself and others when using drugs
<http://harmreduction.org/our-resources/>

Instructions for cleaning injection equipment
<http://www.thewellproject.org/hiv-information/cleaning-equipment-injecting-drugs>