Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver. The liver gets inflamed. It may also be swollen and tender.

How does it occur?

Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus. The virus is spread mainly through contact with the blood of someone who is infected. Sometimes it is spread through sexual contact. You can get the infection from:

- receiving infected blood, blood products, or transplanted organs
- long-term kidney dialysis if supplies or equipment is used that has someone else's infected blood on it
- contact with infected blood if you are a healthcare worker, especially from accidental needlesticks
- your mother if she had hepatitis C when you were born
- intravenous (IV) drug abuse
- sharing nasal cocaine equipment with other people
- sharing razors or toothbrushes with an infected person
- getting a permanent tattoo with nonsterile equipment
- having unprotected sex with someone infected with hepatitis C.

Before 1990 one of the most common ways to get hepatitis C was blood transfusion. However, now blood donors are screened for the virus, and their blood is not used if it is infected. It is estimated that the current risk for getting hepatitis C from a transfusion is 1 in 2 million.

The disease can be spread by people who do not have any symptoms and may not know they carry the virus. These people are called asymptomatic carriers.

Hepatitis C cannot spread by hugging or kissing, food or water, sneezing, coughing, casual contact, or sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses. Hepatitis C appears to have little risk for spread through breastfeeding.

What are the symptoms?

You may not have any symptoms of hepatitis until several weeks, months, or years after you are infected with the virus. Or you may never have any clear symptoms.

If you do have symptoms, they may include:
• yellowish skin and eyes (jaundice)
• tiredness
• dark urine
• abdominal pain
• loss of appetite
• nausea and vomiting.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your medical history and symptoms. Especially important is your history of hepatitis risk factors such as IV drug abuse or unsafe sex.

Your provider will look at your skin and eyes for signs of hepatitis. Your provider will check your belly to see if the liver is bigger than it should be or hurts when it is touched.

You will have blood tests. If blood tests show that your liver is not working normally, your provider will do tests to find out if a virus is causing the problems. Tests that look for viruses can identify the hepatitis B virus. (Several types of viruses can cause hepatitis.)

You may need to have a liver biopsy to check for damage to the liver. Your skin will be numbed and then a needle will be put through your skin and into your liver. The needle is used to get a small piece of the liver for tests.

How is it treated?

The usual treatment is rest and a healthy diet and lifestyle. Your healthcare provider will recommend that you avoid alcohol for at least 6 months.

Usually it is not necessary to stay at the hospital.

If you keep having symptoms or your liver function tests remain abnormal, you may be given antiviral drugs to slow or stop the virus from damaging the liver. You may be treated with more than 1 drug. The goal of treatment is not just to make you feel better, but to try to prevent damage to your liver. You may get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B to prevent more damage to your liver by these other types of hepatitis.

Doctors are continuing to search for the best ways to treat hepatitis C. As new information becomes available, treatments change. You should discuss possible new treatments with your healthcare provider.

How long will the effects last?

Symptoms of first infection, when they occur, may last 1 to 6 weeks and then they usually go away completely.

Some people who have hepatitis C develop the chronic form of the disease. This means the virus keeps affecting the liver for several months or years. Damage to the liver by the infection can scar the liver. This scarring of the liver is called cirrhosis. The infection and damage might even cause liver failure. Your healthcare provider may check your blood every few months for signs of chronic liver disease.

Infection with the hepatitis C virus increases your risk for liver cancer.

How can I take care of myself?

• See your healthcare provider regularly.
• Follow your provider's instructions for taking medicine for your symptoms. You need to avoid taking
medicines that can damage the liver more (for example, acetaminophen). Ask your provider which medicines you can safely take for your symptoms, such as itching and nausea.

- Follow your provider’s advice for how much rest you need and when you can go back to your normal activities, including work or school. As your symptoms get better, you may slowly start being more active. It is best to avoid too much physical exertion until your provider says it's OK.
- Eat small, high-protein, high-calorie meals, even when you feel nauseated. Sipping soft drinks or juices, and sucking on hard candy may help you feel less nauseated.
- Don't drink alcohol unless your healthcare provider says it is safe.
- Contact your healthcare provider if:
  - Your appetite keeps getting worse.
  - You are getting more and more tired.
  - You have vomiting, diarrhea, or abdominal pain.
  - Your skin gets yellowish.
  - You have a new rash.

What can be done to help prevent the spread of hepatitis C?

There are no shots that protect against hepatitis C. If you have hepatitis C, you can help prevent its spread by following these guidelines:

- Don't let others come in contact with your blood; for example, when you have a bloody nose or a cut.
- Clean any blood stains with a mixture of 1 part household bleach to 9 parts water.
- Cover your cuts and open sores.
- Do not share anything that might have blood on it, such as needles, toothbrushes, or razor blades.
- Practice safe sex.
- Do not donate blood, body organs, other tissues, or sperm.

At this time there is no known way to prevent infection of a baby born to a mother infected with hepatitis C.

For more information, contact:

American Liver Foundation  
Phone: 800-GOLIVER (465-4837)  
Web site: [http://www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org)

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References

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