

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?



Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis C virus. When first infected, a person can develop “acute” infection, which can range in severity from a very mild illness with few or no symptoms to a serious condition requiring hospitalization.

Acute Hepatitis C is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the Hepatitis C virus. For reasons that are not known, 15%-25% of people “clear” the virus without treatment. Approximately 75%-85% of people who became infected with the Hepatitis C virus develop “chronic” or lifelong, infection. **Chronic** Hepatitis C is a long-term illness that occurs when the Hepatitis C virus remains in a person’s body.

An estimated 3.2 million people in the United States have chronic Hepatitis C. Most are unaware of their infection. Each year, about 17,000 Americans become infected with Hepatitis C.

Spread of Disease

Hepatitis C is usually spread when blood from a person infected with the Hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. Today, most people become infected with Hepatitis C by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992, Hepatitis C was also commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Although uncommon, outbreaks of Hepatitis C have occurred from blood contamination in medical settings.

Hepatitis C can also be spread through sex. Having a sexually transmitted disease or HIV, sex with multiple partners, or rough sex appears to increase a person’s risk for Hepatitis C.

Signs and Symptoms

Many people with Hepatitis C do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. Even though a person has no symptoms, the virus can still be detected in the blood.

If Symptoms occur with acute infection, they can appear anytime from 2 to 6 months after exposure. Symptoms of chronic Hepatitis C can take up to 30 years to develop. Damage to the liver can silently occur during this time. When symptoms do appear, they often are a sign of advanced liver disease. Symptoms for both acute and chronic Hepatitis C include:

- Fever
- Vomiting
- Joint pain
- Fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Jaundice
- Loss of appetite
- Dark Urine
- Nausea
- Grey-colored Stools

Diagnosis

Doctors can diagnose Hepatitis C using specific blood tests that are not part of blood work typically done during regular physical exams. Typically, a person first gets a screening test that looks for “antibodies” to the Hepatitis C virus. Antibodies are chemicals released into the bloodstream, even if the person clears the virus. If the screening test is positive for Hepatitis C antibodies, different blood tests are needed to determine whether the infection has been cleared or has become a chronic infection.

Treatment

Since acute Hepatitis C rarely causes symptoms, it often goes undiagnosed and therefore untreated. When it is diagnosed, doctors recommend rest, adequate nutrition, fluids, and antiviral medications. People with chronic Hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease. Even though a person may not have symptoms or feel sick, damage to the liver can still occur. Antiviral medication can be used to treat some people with chronic Hepatitis C, although not everyone needs or can benefit from treatment. For many, treatment can be successful and results in the virus no longer being detected.

People with chronic Hepatitis C should see a doctor regularly. They also should ask their health professional before taking any prescriptions or over-the-counter medications – including herbal supplements or vitamins – as they can potentially damage the liver. People with chronic Hepatitis C should also avoid alcohol since it can accelerate liver damage.

Prevention

To reduce the risk of becoming infected with the hepatitis C virus:

- Do not share needles or other equipment to inject cosmetic substances, drugs, or steroids.
- Do not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person’s blood, such as razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, or glucose monitors.
- Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting.

Although there is currently no vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C, research is being conducted to develop one.



For more sources of information on this topic visit:

ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT www.scchealth.co

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES www.michigan.gov/mdhhs

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION www.cdc.gov