

Patient Information: About Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be affected. **Hepatitis C** (Hep C) is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the hepatitis C (HCV) virus. It is spread when a person is exposed to the blood of another person who has the virus.

How Common is Hepatitis C?

An estimated 4 million people in the United States are infected with HCV. The majority of patients are not aware of their infection and go for years without any symptoms, which is why Hep C is frequently referred to as the “silent epidemic. Hep C infects approximately 20,000 Americans each year and of every 100 persons infected with HCV, 1-5 will die from the consequences of untreated infection. Hep C infections are more frequent than HIV infection in the United States.

How is Hepatitis C Spread?

Hep C is spread when a person becomes exposed to the blood from a person infected with HCV. Today, most people became infected with the hepatitis C virus by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs or through blood transfusions or organ transplants prior to 1992. Other common risk factors for Hep C include:

- Born between 1945 and 1965
- Sharing a needle to inject drugs, even once
- Being born to an HCV-infected mother
- Kidney dialysis
- Accidental exposure to infected blood (e.g. Healthcare/public safety workers)
- Unprotected sex, especially with multiple partners
- Intranasal cocaine use through shared paraphernalia
- Tattoos or piercings (e.g. exposed to unsterilized or contaminated needles)

Understanding Chronic Hepatitis C Infection

Acute hepatitis C is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to HCV. About 15%–25% of people are able to “clear” the virus without treatment. Approximately 75%–85% of people who become infected with HCV develop what is known as “chronic” infection, meaning it could continue as a lifelong infection. Chronic hepatitis C is a long-term illness that occurs when HCV remains in a person’s body for an extended period of time. Over time, it can lead to serious liver problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver failure, or liver cancer. If Hep C remains untreated, serious consequences of chronic hepatitis C that can occur include:

- Liver damage such as cirrhosis, or scarring of the liver
- Liver failure
- The need for a liver transplant
- Liver cancer
- Death

That is why it is important to be tested for chronic hepatitis C if you think you may be at risk.

Symptoms of Chronic Hepatitis C

Very often acute hepatitis C does not cause symptoms and, therefore, does not get diagnosed or treated. If symptoms occur with acute infection, they can appear anytime from 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure. Unfortunately, symptoms of chronic hepatitis C can take up to 30 years to develop while damage to the liver can occur during this time. Symptoms for either acute or chronic hepatitis C can include fever, fatigue, a loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, grey-colored stools, joint pain, and jaundice.

Diagnosing Chronic Hepatitis C

Doctors can diagnose Hep C using certain blood tests that are not part of blood work typically done during regular physical exams. Even though a person has no symptoms, the virus can still be detected in the blood. The first test usually performed is a screening test to detect “antibodies” to HCV in your blood. If you have these antibodies, then you have been exposed to HCV but may not be chronically infected.

If the screening test is positive for HCV antibodies, different blood tests are needed to determine whether the infection has been cleared or has become a chronic infection. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now recommends that anyone born between 1945 and 1965 needs to be tested at least once, regardless of other risk factors.

Other sources of information on Hepatitis C

Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

Hepatitis C – General Fact Sheet:

English: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HCV/PDFs/HepCGeneralFactSheet.pdf>

Spanish: http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HCV/PDFs/HepCGeneralFactSheet_sp.pdf

National Institutes of Health: http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hepc_ez/

American College of Gastroenterology: <http://patients.gi.org/topics/hepatitis-c/#tabs1>

American Liver Foundation (ALF): A national voluntary health organization dedicated to preventing, treating, and curing hepatitis and other liver and gallbladder diseases through research and education.

1-800-GO-LIVER (465-4837)

<http://www.liverfoundation.org/>

About-Chronic-hepc: <http://www.pegasys.com/patient/about-chronic-hepc/diagnosing/index.html>

<http://www.pegintron.com/peg/pegintron/consumer/about-pegintron/administering-pegintron.jsp>

Patient Support for Medication Use: <http://www.olsio.com/support>

<http://www.mysupportpath.com/>