

Patient Information: Living with Hepatitis C

What is Chronic Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (Hep C) is a contagious disease caused by infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV). The virus is found in blood and certain bodily fluids and is spread when a person who is not immune comes in contact with blood or bodily fluids from an infected person. Chronic hep C refers to a long-term infection with the HCV that can lead to serious health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, or liver cancer. Over time, approximately 60%-70% of people with chronic hepatitis C develop liver disease and 5-20% will develop cirrhosis and 1-5% will die from complications related to the virus.

Understanding Your Diagnosis

If your doctor tells you that you have a positive antibody test for HCV, it means you were likely exposed to hep C by coming in contact with the blood of another person who is infected. Your doctor may recommend a follow up test called an HCV RNA test to confirm active infection.

Once you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C infection, you should take the following steps:

- Work with your doctor – other tests may be needed to assess any liver damage
- Inform others as needed - understand how you can protect others from infection
- Understand treatment options – with successful treatment hep C can be cured

You may never know exactly how you acquired your hep C, but the important thing now is to take steps to avoid more damage to your liver that could lead to serious liver disease.

I Don't Feel Sick So Why Go To a Doctor?

Many people with hep C appear perfectly normal and healthy for years, even though the virus could be quietly causing major damage to their liver. The longer treatment is delayed, the more damage could be occurring to your liver. And even though you might not have symptoms from your infection, HCV can be spread to others.

How is Chronic Hep C Treated?

Currently, there is no vaccine against HCV. Over the past few years, new treatments that destroy the virus itself have been approved, including the first treatment for hep C that requires taking one pill once a day for as little as 8 weeks.

The first step in the management of HCV is appropriate linkage to care, or evaluation by a practitioner who is prepared to provide comprehensive management. Treatment is recommended for patients with chronic HCV infection in order to stop disease progression and related complications. The goal of treatment is typically to achieve a “sustained virologic response” or SVR, meaning the hepatitis C virus can no longer be found in your blood 12 weeks after the end of treatment.

What Else Can I Do to Avoid Liver Damage

Ask your doctor before taking any prescription, over-the-counter medications, supplements or vitamins. You should avoid alcohol since it can also increase the speed of liver damage. Talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated against Hepatitis A and B. Always talk to your doctor before you try any alternative treatment that you may have heard about.

Common Q&A's:

Are only people who use intravenous drugs on a long-term basis at high risk for chronic hepatitis C?

No, IV intravenous drug use, even once or a few times many years ago, is a major risk factor for chronic hepatitis C. In addition, if you were born from 1945 through 1965, regardless of risk factors, you should be tested at least once for hep C. Many people born during this time period were infected in the 1970's and 1980's when HCV rates were at their highest.

Is my hepatitis disease considered mild if the level of the chronic hep C virus in my blood is low?

No, viral load does not show how severe your liver disease might be. However, patients with lower viral loads do tend to have a better treatment response.

Since chronic hep C is a long-term condition, will treatment will be just as effective if I wait until later?

Studies with current treatments have shown that patients who are treated after liver damage progresses to cirrhosis, or liver scarring, have lower response rates.

Can I pass my hep C to others?

Yes. The hepatitis C virus is transmitted through blood, so any person who comes in contact with your blood could become infected. This includes contact with even small amounts of blood, such as on toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or open cuts and sores. Hep C is not spread by hugging, kissing, coughing, or sharing food, drinking glasses, or food utensils.

After treatment, is a person protected from Hepatitis C?

No. A person who has been successfully treated is not protected from Hepatitis C for life. A person can get infected with Hepatitis C again if he or she is exposed to blood infected with the Hepatitis C virus.

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

Living with Chronic Hepatitis C: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HCV/PDFs/HepCLivingWithChronic.pdf>

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.olsysio.com/support>

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