

# Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a serious disease caused by the HCV virus. The disease attacks the liver. The liver is one of the largest organs in the body. It cleans the blood and helps to digest food.

The virus is spread when blood or body fluids of an infected person enter the body of a healthy person. Hepatitis C is one of the leading causes of lifelong, or chronic, liver disease.

Certain types of cancer are known to develop from hepatitis C. This includes liver and lymphoma. These hepatitis C-associated cancers can occur as the first, or primary, cancer or in patients who already have a different type of cancer. This is called a secondary cancer. It may take 20 years or more after infection for permanent liver damage to be seen.

## Risks

Anyone can get hepatitis C, but some people have a higher risk:

- People born between 1945 to 1965
- People who share needles or who have a history of using injected illegal drugs even once or long time ago
- People who received blood transfusions before 1992
- Organ transplant recipients before July 1992
- Hemodialysis patients
- People with HIV infection
- People with abnormal liver tests
- People who received clotting factor concentrate before 1987
- Infants born to mothers who have hepatitis C
- People who have unprotected sex with an infected partner
- Health care workers, emergency medical and public safety workers

## Prevention

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. However, you can lower your risk by doing the following:

- **Do not** use illegal drugs. Never share syringes, needles or other drug equipment.
- **Do not** share personal items that might have blood on them. Examples include: toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers and files, scissors, etc. **Do not** have contact with menstrual blood.
- Cover open wounds.
- If you get body piercing or tattoos, make sure the tools have been sterilized.
- If you have hepatitis C, **do not** donate blood, body organs, other tissue or semen.
- Practice safe sex and always use a condom.

## Symptoms

Most people have no symptoms, though there are symptoms to be aware of:

- Loss of energy
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea or pain in the abdomen
- Yellowing of the skin and eyes, called jaundice
- Dark urine
- Clay-colored stools

If the hepatitis virus is suspected, you will need a blood test to confirm the diagnosis. It will show if you have been infected. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends adults, ages 18 to 79 years old, get a one-time blood test for hepatitis C.

All new patients at MD Anderson are tested for hepatitis C. The CDC recommends routine testing for people with ongoing risk factors such as current users of drug injections and maintenance hemodialysis.

## Treatment

Hepatitis C is curable. Medicines are used to treat and cure hepatitis C. They include a combination of at least 2 anti-viral medicines.

## Living With Hepatitis C

Many people enjoy long lives without becoming seriously ill. Take these steps:

- Have regular blood tests to check liver function.
- Tell your doctor about any new symptoms.
- Avoid drinking alcohol.
- Ask your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medicine. Many are harmful to the liver.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- **Do not** donate blood or organs.

## Long-Term Effects

Most people with hepatitis C will have it the rest of their lives if not treated. Some will develop chronic liver disease. This may be fatal. A person with hepatitis C may need a liver transplant.

## Hepatitis C Reactivation

Hepatitis C can interfere with cancer treatment. When the immune system is weakened during chemotherapy, a flare-up of the hepatitis C virus can occur. This is called “hepatitis C reactivation.” Hepatitis C reactivation can be prevented with proper screening and medicine.

## **Contact Information**

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