

Connecticut Department of Public Health

Fact Sheet - *Hepatitis C*



What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus. It can cause either "acute" or "chronic" illness. Acute hepatitis C is a newly acquired infection that causes illness within six months or less of exposure to the hepatitis C virus. Chronic hepatitis C results from the hepatitis C virus remaining in the body for six months or more. Chronic hepatitis C infection can cause long-term illness including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

How is hepatitis C spread (transmitted)?

Transmission occurs when blood or other body fluids from an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person. This may happen through sharing of needles or "works" when "shooting" drugs, through accidental needle sticks, or from an infected mother to baby during birth. Sexual transmission can occur but is much less efficient than transmission through blood exposure. Hepatitis C is not spread through kissing, hugging, breastfeeding, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, coughing, sneezing, food, water, or casual contact.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Most people (80%) do not experience any symptoms. Some people experience abdominal pain, loss of appetite, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, dark urine, or jaundice (yellowing of skin and eyes).

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may occur from 2 weeks to 6 months after infection but usually within 2 months.

What are the long-term effects?

Most infected persons (75-85%) develop a chronic infection. With chronic infection, the virus is not cleared from the body and can lead to liver disease in about 70% of persons.

How long is a person able to spread hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C appears in the blood one or more weeks prior to symptoms. Chronically infected persons carry the virus indefinitely therefore may transmit it to others if prevention methods are not undertaken.

If I clear the virus, can I become re-infected?

Yes. Hepatitis C antibodies are not protective, unlike some other infectious diseases. Therefore, it is important not to expose yourself to the blood of others.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Only a doctor can diagnose hepatitis C. Diagnosis is based on a laboratory test for hepatitis C.

What is the treatment and medical management for hepatitis C?

People with hepatitis C should be evaluated by their doctor for liver disease. Treatment options are complex and not everyone needs treatment. Interferon and ribavirin are two drugs licensed for the treatment of persons with chronic hepatitis C. Combination therapy using interferon and ribavirin is currently the most popular treatment choice. Combination therapy can clear the virus in up to 5 out of 10 people with genotype 1 and in up to 8 out of 10 people for genotype 2 and 3.

How can the risk of chronic liver disease be reduced among people chronically infected with hepatitis C?

See your doctor regularly. Additional tests may be needed to check to see if you have liver damage. Do not drink alcohol. Check with your doctor before taking any medications, even over-the-counter and herbal medicines may be toxic to your liver. You may need to get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.

Fact Sheet - *Hepatitis C* (continued)



How can hepatitis C be prevented?

- People with hepatitis C should be aware that their blood and possibly other body fluids contain the virus.
- Do not shoot drugs. If you do, never share needles or works.
- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, needles, or other personal care items.
- If you are a health care worker, use standard barrier precautions.
- Hepatitis C can be transmitted through sexual contact, but it is rare. Use of condoms may help reduce the chance of hepatitis C transmission.
- Persons with hepatitis C should not donate blood, tissues, or organs.
- There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.