

HEPATITIS C

PERSONAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus, which is found in the blood of persons who have the disease.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is spread primarily by exposure to human blood or blood products. Hepatitis C transmission occurs when blood from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. The hepatitis C virus is spread through sharing needles or works when shooting drugs, through needlesticks or sharps exposures on the job, or from an infected mother to her baby through the birth process. Sexual transmission is also possible but is less common.

Symptoms can develop from 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure to the virus. Hepatitis C is serious for some persons, but not for others. Most persons who get hepatitis C carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Many of those persons have some liver damage but do not feel sick from the disease. Some persons with liver damage due to hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver failure, while others have no long term effects.

How is it treated?

A blood test for hepatitis C infection is recommended for current or former injection drug users, blood or solid organ transplant recipients before July 1992, persons receiving long term dialysis, persons who received clotting factor concentrates produced before 1987, people with signs of liver disease, or children born to women with hepatitis C. There are anti-viral drugs available to treat chronic hepatitis C. These medications are effective in approximately half of the people treated.

How can we prevent hepatitis C?

- There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.
- If you are infected with hepatitis C, do not donate blood, body organs, other tissue, or sperm.
- Do not share toothbrushes, razors or other personal articles that may have blood on them.
- Cover your cuts and open sores.
- If you want to lower the risk of hepatitis C transmission to your sex partner, use barrier precautions such as latex condoms.
- Stop drug use and get into a treatment program. If you cannot stop drug use, then do not share syringes, needles, water or other drug paraphernalia.
- Consider the risks involved with tattooing and body piercing. You can become infected if the tools are contaminated with blood or practitioner does not follow good health practices.
- Health care workers and other employees who are exposed to blood and body fluids should be vaccinated with hepatitis B vaccine and follow routine barrier precautions.
- Persons who are infected with hepatitis C should receive hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccines.

SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS C

- There may be no or few symptoms in the early stages of hepatitis C, or symptoms may be mild (tiredness, nausea, headache and/or loss of appetite).
- More serious symptoms include fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, light colored stools, dark colored urine and occasionally yellowing of the eyes and skin (jaundice).
- Chronic hepatitis C may lower a person's energy level to the point where they have trouble with daily activities.

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