

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV).

Transmission

Hepatitis C is most commonly spread via direct contact with blood from an infected person. This can happen through:

- **Sharing drug injection equipment.** Most people become infected with hepatitis C by sharing needles, syringes or any other equipment used to prepare and inject drugs.
- **Birth.** Approximately 6% of infants born to infected mothers will get hepatitis C.
- **Health care exposures.** Rarely, people can become infected when health care professionals do not follow the proper steps needed to prevent the spread of bloodborne infections.
- **Sex with an infected person.** Rarely, hepatitis C can spread during sex, though it has been reported more often among men who have sex with men.
- **Unregulated tattoos or body piercings.** Hepatitis C can spread when getting tattoos or body piercings in unlicensed facilities, informal settings, or with non-sterile instruments.
- **Sharing personal items** such as glucose monitors, razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, and other items that may have come into contact with infected blood, even in amounts too small to see.
- **Blood transfusions and organ transplants.** Before widespread screening of the blood supply in 1992, hepatitis C was also spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Now, the risk of transmission to recipients of blood or blood products is extremely low.

Symptoms

If symptoms occur, they usually appear within two to 12 weeks, but can take up to six months to develop.

Symptoms may include:

- Yellow skin or eyes
- Not wanting to eat
- Upset stomach
- Throwing up
- Stomach pain
- Fever
- Dark urine
- Light-colored stool
- Joint pain
- Fatigue

Chronic hepatitis C:

For more than half of people who become infected with the HCV virus, it becomes a long-term, chronic infection. Chronic hepatitis C can result in serious, even life-threatening health problems like cirrhosis and liver cancer. People with chronic hepatitis C often have no symptoms. If symptoms appear, they often are a sign of advanced liver disease.

Diagnosis

HCV is diagnosed through blood tests. If an initial antibody test is positive, additional tests will be taken to determine if a person has a current active infection. This test is often referred to as an HCV RNA test.

It is recommended that all adults ages 18 to 79 years be tested for hepatitis C at least once in their lifetime, even those without symptoms or known liver disease. Screening for HCV is especially important if you're at high risk of exposure, including:

- Anyone who has ever injected or inhaled illicit drugs
- Anyone who has abnormal liver function test results with no identified cause
- Babies born to mothers with hepatitis C
- Health care and emergency workers who have been exposed to blood or accidental needle sticks
- People with hemophilia who were treated with clotting factors before 1987
- People who have undergone long-term hemodialysis treatments
- People who received blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992
- Sexual partners of anyone diagnosed with hepatitis C infection
- People with HIV infection
- Anyone born from 1945 to 1965
- Anyone who has been in prison

Prevention

- **Avoid sharing or reusing needles** while injecting drugs, steroids, hormones or other substances.
- **Do not use personal items** that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood.
- **Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility.**

Treatment

HCV can be cured with **antiviral medications**.

- Over 90% of people infected with HCV can be cured, with 8–12 weeks of oral therapy.
- New, "**direct-acting**" **antiviral medications**, sometimes in combination with existing ones result in better outcomes, fewer side effects, shorter treatment times (some as short as eight weeks).

For more information about the treatment of hepatitis C, contact your health care provider or visit [Hepatitis C - FAQs, Statistics, Resources, Find Treatment, & More | CDC](#).

Exclusion Guidance

Individuals with hepatitis c should not be excluded from work, school, or child care unless the [general exclusions apply](#).

Pregnancy and Hepatitis C

It is recommended that pregnant women are screened for HCV during each pregnancy.

For additional information about hepatitis C, contact the North Dakota Health and Human Services' Division of Public Health at 800.427.2180.

Resources:

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023, April 11). *Hepatitis C - faqs, statistics, resources, find treatment, & more*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/>
2. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2021, August 31). *Hepatitis C*. Mayo Clinic. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/hepatitis-c/symptoms-causes/syc-20354278>

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