

# What I need to know about Hepatitis C



U.S. Department  
of Health and  
Human Services

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

**NIDDK** NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF  
DIABETES AND DIGESTIVE  
AND KIDNEY DISEASES

National Digestive Diseases  
Information Clearinghouse



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## Contents

What is hepatitis C? .....	1
What is the liver?.....	1
What causes hepatitis C?.....	2
Who gets hepatitis C? .....	2
How could I get hepatitis C?.....	3
What are the symptoms of hepatitis C? .....	4
What is chronic hepatitis C? .....	5
How is hepatitis C diagnosed? .....	6
How is hepatitis C treated? .....	7
How can I avoid getting hepatitis C? .....	8
What should I do if I think I have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus? .....	9
Points to Remember .....	9
Hope through Research .....	10
Pronunciation Guide.....	11
For More Information .....	12
Acknowledgments .....	14

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease. **Hepatitis\*** means **inflammation** of the liver. Inflammation is the painful, red swelling that results when tissues of the body become injured or infected. Inflammation can cause organs to not work properly.

## What is the liver?

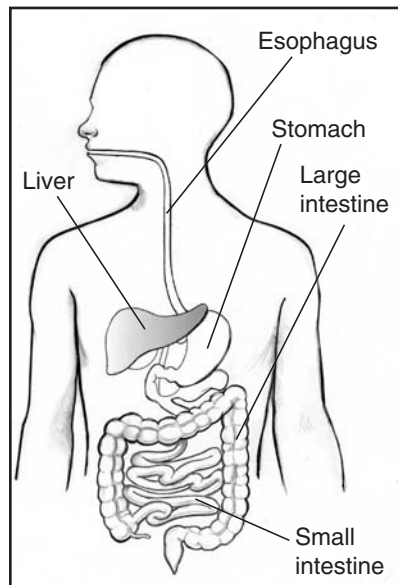
The liver is an organ that does many important things.

The liver

- removes harmful chemicals from your blood
- fights infection
- helps digest food
- stores nutrients and vitamins
- stores energy

You cannot live without a liver.

\*See page 11 for tips on how to say the words in **bold** type.



Hepatitis C is a liver disease.

## What causes hepatitis C?

The hepatitis C **virus** causes hepatitis C. Viruses are germs that can cause sickness. For example, the flu is caused by a virus. People can pass viruses to each other.

## Who gets hepatitis C?

Anyone can get hepatitis C, but some people are at higher risk, including

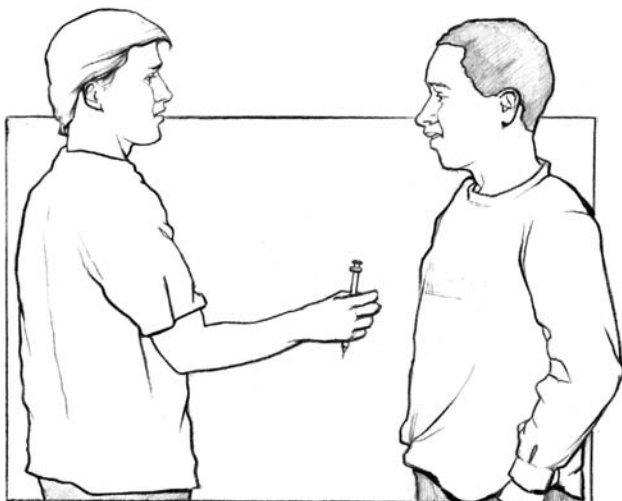
- people who were born to a mother with hepatitis C
- people who have had more than one sex partner in the last 6 months or have a history of sexually transmitted disease
- people who had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before July 1992
- people with hemophilia who received blood products before 1987
- people who have used illegal injection drugs

## How could I get hepatitis C?

You could get hepatitis C through contact with an infected person's blood.

You could get hepatitis C from

- being born to a mother with hepatitis C
- having sex with an infected person
- being tattooed or pierced with unsterilized tools that were used on an infected person
- getting an accidental needle stick with a needle that was used on an infected person
- using an infected person's razor or toothbrush
- sharing drug needles with an infected person



You could get hepatitis C by sharing drug needles with an infected person.

You cannot get hepatitis C from

- shaking hands with an infected person
- hugging an infected person
- sitting next to an infected person

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people have no symptoms until the virus causes liver damage, which can take 10 or more years to happen. Others have one or more of the following symptoms:

- yellowish eyes and skin, called **jaundice**
- a longer than usual amount of time for bleeding to stop
- swollen stomach or ankles
- easy bruising
- tiredness
- upset stomach
- fever
- loss of appetite
- diarrhea
- light-colored stools
- dark yellow urine



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A doctor can test you for hepatitis C.



## What is chronic hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is **chronic** when the body can't get rid of the hepatitis C virus. Although some people clear the virus from their bodies in a few months, most hepatitis C infections become chronic.

Without treatment, chronic hepatitis C can cause scarring of the liver, called **cirrhosis**; liver cancer; and liver failure.

Symptoms of cirrhosis include

- yellowish eyes and skin, called jaundice
- a longer than usual amount of time for bleeding to stop
- swollen stomach or ankles
- tiredness
- nausea
- weakness
- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- spiderlike blood vessels, called spider **angiomas**, that develop on the skin

## How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Hepatitis C is diagnosed through blood tests, which can also show if you have chronic hepatitis C or another type of hepatitis. Your doctor may suggest getting a liver **biopsy** if chronic hepatitis C is suspected. A liver biopsy is a test for liver damage. The doctor uses a needle to remove a tiny piece of liver, which is then looked at with a microscope.



Blood is drawn for hepatitis C testing.

## How is hepatitis C treated?

Hepatitis C is not treated unless it becomes chronic. Chronic hepatitis C is treated with drugs that slow or stop the virus from damaging the liver.

### Drugs for the Treatment of Chronic Hepatitis C

Chronic hepatitis C is most often treated with the drug combination **peginterferon** and **ribavirin**, which attacks the hepatitis C virus. Peginterferon is taken through weekly shots and ribavirin is taken daily by mouth. Treatment lasts from 24 to 48 weeks.

### Liver Transplantation

A liver transplant may be necessary if chronic hepatitis C causes liver failure. Liver transplantation surgery replaces a failed liver with a healthy one from a donor. Drug treatment often must continue because hepatitis C usually comes back after surgery.



Hepatitis C is treated with pills and shots of medicine.

## How can I avoid getting hepatitis C?

You can protect yourself and others from hepatitis C if you

- do not share drug needles
- wear gloves if you have to touch another person's blood
- use a condom during sex
- do not borrow another person's toothbrush, razor, or anything else that could have blood on it
- make sure any tattoos or body piercings you get are done with sterile tools
- do not donate blood or blood products if you have hepatitis C



Do not share needles if you inject drugs.

## What should I do if I think I have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus?

See your doctor and get tested if you are at higher risk of getting hepatitis C or if you think you were exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Many people do not know they are infected. Early diagnosis and treatment can help prevent liver damage.

### Points to Remember

- Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus.
- Anyone can get hepatitis C, but some people are at higher risk.
- You could get hepatitis C through contact with an infected person's blood.
- Hepatitis C is chronic when the body can't get rid of the hepatitis C virus.
- Liver damage can take 10 or more years to happen and is often the first sign of hepatitis C.
- Get tested if you are at higher risk or think you may have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Many people do not know they are infected.
- Chronic hepatitis C is treated with drugs that slow or stop the virus from damaging the liver.

## Hope through Research

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) conducts and supports basic and clinical research into many digestive disorders, including hepatitis C.

Participants in clinical trials can play a more active role in their own health care, gain access to new research treatments before they are widely available, and help others by contributing to medical research. For information about current studies, visit [www.ClinicalTrials.gov](http://www.ClinicalTrials.gov).

## Pronunciation Guide

**angiomas** (an-jee-OH-muhs)

**biopsy** (BY-op-see)

**chronic** (KRON-ik)

**cirrhosis** (sur-ROH-siss)

**hepatitis** (HEP-uh-TY-tiss)

**inflammation** (IN-fluh-MAY-shuhn)

**jaundice** (JAWN-diss)

**peginterferon** (PEG-IN-tur-FIHR-on)

**ribavirin** (RY-buh-VY-rin)

**virus** (VY-ruhss)

## **For More Information**

### **American Liver Foundation**

75 Maiden Lane, Suite 603

New York, NY 10038-4810

Phone: 1-800-GO-LIVER (1-800-465-4837)  
or 212-668-1000

Fax: 212-483-8179

Email: [info@liverfoundation.org](mailto:info@liverfoundation.org)

Internet: [www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org)

### **Hepatitis Foundation International**

504 Blick Drive

Silver Spring, MD 20904-2901

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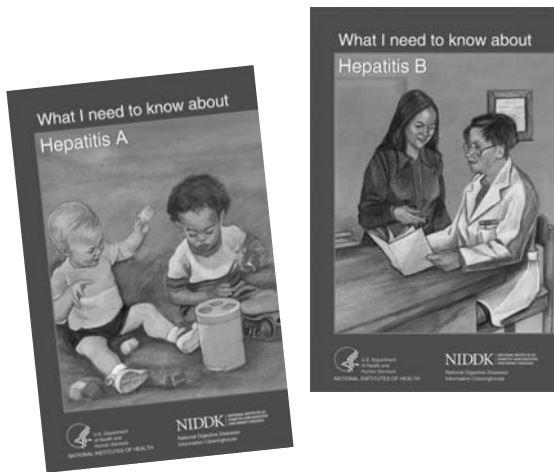
Email: [hfi@comcast.net](mailto:hfi@comcast.net)

Internet: [www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)



Other types of hepatitis exist. The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) also has booklets about hepatitis A and hepatitis B:

- *What I need to know about Hepatitis A*
- *What I need to know about Hepatitis B*



You can get a free copy of each booklet by calling 1–800–891–5389, by going online to [www.catalog.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.catalog.niddk.nih.gov), or by writing to

**NDDIC**

2 Information Way  
Bethesda, MD 20892–3570

Hepatitis information for health professionals is also available.

## Acknowledgments

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The National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NDDIC) is a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The NIDDK is part of the National Institutes of Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Established in 1980, the Clearinghouse provides information about digestive diseases to people with digestive disorders and to their families, health care professionals, and the public. The NDDIC answers inquiries, develops and distributes publications, and works closely with professional and patient organizations and Government agencies to coordinate resources about digestive diseases.

This publication is not copyrighted. The Clearinghouse encourages users of this booklet to duplicate and distribute as many copies as desired.

This booklet is also available at [www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov](http://www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov).

This publication may contain information about medications. When prepared, this publication included the most current information available. For updates or for questions about any medications, contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration toll-free at 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332) or visit [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov). Consult your doctor for more information.



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