

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. Viruses, drinking too much alcohol, abusing drugs and taking some medicines can all cause hepatitis. When a person first contracts hepatitis, the liver may become inflamed very suddenly. This is called acute hepatitis. If you have acute hepatitis, you might have nausea, vomiting, fever and body aches. Or you may not have any symptoms. Most people get over the acute inflammation in a few days or a few weeks. Sometimes, however, the inflammation doesn't go away. When the inflammation doesn't go away, the person has chronic hepatitis.

How does hepatitis affect the liver?

The liver breaks down waste products in your blood. When the liver is inflamed, it doesn't do a good job of getting rid of waste products. One waste product in the blood, called bilirubin begins to build up in the blood and tissues when the liver isn't working right. The bilirubin makes the skin of a person with hepatitis turn a yellow-orange color. This is called jaundice. Bilirubin and other waste products may also cause itching, nausea, fever and body aches.

What is hepatitis C?

Several viruses can infect the liver. There are three main types: hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. Hepatitis C is usually spread through contact with blood products, like health care workers accidentally being stuck with a used needle, using IV drugs and sharing needles, or getting a blood transfusion before 1992. Most people don't feel sick when they are first infected with hepatitis C. Instead, the virus stays in their liver where it can cause chronic liver inflammation.

Most people who are infected with hepatitis C don't have any symptoms for years. However, hepatitis C is a chronic illness (it doesn't go away). If you have hepatitis C, you need to be watched carefully by a doctor because it can lead to cirrhosis (liver failure) and liver cancer.

I've never used IV drugs or been stuck with a dirty needle. How did I get hepatitis C?

Many times, the cause of hepatitis C is never found. This virus may be transmitted through sex. It may also be passed from one person to another by living in the same house with someone who has hepatitis C. Sharing razors or toothbrushes may transmit the hepatitis C virus. It can be transmitted by tattoo needles. It can even be passed from a mother to her unborn baby. *All of these ways of catching hepatitis C are uncommon, but they do occur.*

Could I give hepatitis C to someone else?

Yes, as far as we know, once you have hepatitis C, it is always possible to give it to someone else. If you have hepatitis C, you can't donate blood. You should avoid sharing personal items like razors and toothbrushes. Your sex partners should be tested to see if they also have it. However, less than 5 percent of monogamous partners are infected, and many of these have other risk factors for this infection. For this reason, using condoms is not necessarily recommended for monogamous couples. People with multiple sex partners should always use condoms.

How should I take care of myself if I have hepatitis C?

You should eat a healthy diet and start exercising regularly. Talk to your doctor about medications that you are taking, including over-the-counter medications. Many medicines, including acetaminophen (Tylenol) are broken down by the liver and may increase the speed of liver damage. It is very important that you don't drink alcohol.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?

There are vaccines for hepatitis A and hepatitis B, but not for hepatitis C. If you have hepatitis C, your doctor may want you to take the vaccines for hepatitis A and B.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?

Some people with hepatitis C don't have any symptoms. They only have a little inflammation of their liver. If you have hepatitis C but no symptoms, your doctor will want to keep a close watch on you. This is done by checking your blood several times in the first year and then less frequently thereafter. If your tests are normal, you won't require further treatment.

Some people with hepatitis C have more significant inflammation. They may need to consult with a gastroenterologist and have a liver biopsy (a needle is inserted into the liver to take a specimen for further examination). If the liver shows signs of damage, they may be candidates for further treatment.

Medicine available for hepatitis C includes several drugs called "interferons". The commonest is Rebetron (interferon alfa-2b plus ribavirin). These medicines are given by injections several times each week. They don't cure hepatitis C, but they do make about 1/4 of people feel better and may prevent future liver problems. They have significant side effects including fevers, body aches, headaches, fatigue, depression, irritability, nausea, vomiting, loss of sleep or changes in their blood. Most patients with hepatitis C do not require treatment with medicine.

For more information

American Liver Foundation
75 Maiden Lane, Suite 603
New York,
Telephone: 800-GO-LIVER
<http://www.liverfoundation.org>