

Hepatitis C

The liver is one of the largest organs in the human body, responsible for hundreds of tasks, including processing and storing nutrients from the food you eat and breaking down toxic substances in your blood. If the hepatitis C virus (HCV) infects your liver, you have *hepatitis C*. *Hepatitis* (hep-uh-ty-tus) means “inflammation of the liver,” which occurs when your immune system tries to rid your body of the virus, causing it to scar. This is known as *cirrhosis* (sehr-oh-sis). Over time, cirrhosis can lead to liver failure.

About 3.2 million people in the U.S. are living with hepatitis C, and veterans enrolled in VA health care have higher rates (5.4%) than that of the general population (1.8%). Of every 100 people infected with HCV, 60% to 95% will develop *chronic HCV infection* (meaning the body cannot rid itself of the virus), 10% to 30% will develop cirrhosis, and every year, 1% to 3% of those with cirrhosis will develop a type of liver cancer called *hepatoma* (hep-uh-toe-muh).

What are the symptoms?

Very often, those infected with HCV show no signs or symptoms during the early stages of infection and can live for many years without feeling sick. However, some associated symptoms include:

- Fatigue
- Fever
- Nausea or poor appetite
- Muscle and joint pain
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes)
- Abdominal pain
- Dark urine

Are there complications?

Complications are serious and can develop over a period of many years, including:

- **Cirrhosis.** Scarring of the liver tissue may occur after 20 or 30 years of HCV infection, making it difficult for the liver to function.

- **Hepatoma.** A small number of people infected with HCV will develop liver cancer.
- **Liver failure.** When the liver is severely damaged due to HCV infection, it may lose entirely the ability to function.

How can I prevent it?

Although a person can get HCV infection at birth, the following habits should be practiced to help reduce the chances of getting the virus:

- **Do not use illicit (illegal) drugs.** Needle sharing is the most common way to get HCV. Seek help from a counselor or doctor if you use illicit drugs.
- **Use caution when getting a tattoo or body piercing.** Some tattoo parlors may reuse needles, increasing the risk of spreading HCV. Only visit a shop with a good reputation, ask questions of the employees, and confirm they use sterile needles.
- **Practice safe sex.** Do not engage in unprotected sex, especially if you are uncertain of your partner’s health status.

When should I see a doctor?

If you experience any symptoms that are worrisome to you, visit your primary care doctor. Other important factors to be considered before screening for HCV infection include:

- Born between 1945 and 1965
- Current or former illicit drug user
- Treated for a blood clotting problem before 1987
- Received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before July 1992
- On current kidney dialysis treatment
- Vietnam-era veteran
- Ever had abnormal liver test results or liver disease
- Work in health care or public safety and were exposed to blood through a needle or sharp object
- Infected with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus)
- Have had multiple sex partners
- Current or past sex partners with HCV infection

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- Tattoos or piercings from non-regulated settings
- History of alcohol abuse or dependence
- Born to a mother infected with HCV
- Previously incarcerated

What tests will I need?

There are 2 types of tests your doctor can do to screen you for HCV infection:

- **Liver function tests.** Your doctor may take a blood sample to determine whether you have HCV, to determine how much of the virus is in your blood (called *viral load*), and to evaluate the makeup of the virus, known as the *genotype*, which will help determine treatment options.
- **Liver biopsy.** A small piece of liver tissue is removed by your doctor through a thin needle and is sent to a laboratory to determine how severe the HCV infection is and how best to treat it.

How is HCV treated?

Your doctor may recommend treatment to control the virus, and in 40% to 60% of cases, cure it. Factors such as the genotype, your age, race, weight, extent of liver damage, viral load, other infections (such as HIV), and any previous treatment for HCV may play a role in the course of treatment recommended to you. If treatment is pursued, the following may be prescribed:

- **Antiviral medications.** These drugs help clear the body of HCV. Throughout treatment, your doctor will monitor your response to these antiviral medications. Some can cause depression and flulike symptoms serious enough for your doctor to delay or discontinue treatment.
- **Liver transplant.** If the liver is damaged, a transplant may help you live longer. During a transplant, the damaged liver is replaced with a healthier one from a donor. Even with a liver transplant, HCV infection may not be cured.

Your doctor may also recommend that you receive **hepatitis A and B vaccines**, because these separate viruses can also cause liver damage and complicate treatment of HCV infection.

It is important to note that in some cases, treatment is not always necessary, but follow-up blood tests and close monitoring of the liver for any damage should continue.

What else can I do?

There are several things you can do on your own to keep yourself and those around you healthy, including:

- **Stop drinking alcohol.** Alcohol speeds the progression of liver disease.
- **Avoid medications that cause liver damage.** This can include both prescription and over-the-counter medications.
- **Prevent others from coming in contact with your blood:**
 - Cover open wounds
 - Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or other personal care items
 - Do not donate blood, semen, or body organs
 - Advise health care workers that you have the virus

Being diagnosed with hepatitis C can be overwhelming, but your doctor will guide you through a specific treatment plan to help keep your liver as healthy as possible. For more information on preventing and managing hepatitis C, visit <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/patient/hcv>.

Notes:
