



## 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.

## 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  
 Phone: 1-800-891-0707 or 301-622-4200  
 Fax: 301-622-4702  
 Email: [hfi@comcast.net](mailto:hfi@comcast.net)  
 Internet: [www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)

## 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.



Division of Gastroenterology  
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# Hepatitis C


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# 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.**

## 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 **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 long 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

## 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.

## 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.

