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Introduction

Hepatitis C (HCV for short) is a virus that lives in human blood. A virus is one of the smallest living things known to exist inside plants and animals. HCV makes new hepatitis C viruses by infecting the liver, and after many years the liver can become so damaged by hepatitis C that it cannot perform many of the important jobs that it must do to keep us healthy.

You can only get hepatitis C by getting HCV-infected blood from someone who has hepatitis C, and ONLY if that infected blood gets into your bloodstream.

Many people have hepatitis C so you are not alone. It takes years for hepatitis C to cause damage to the liver and to make someone sick. There are many things that people can do to help fight hepatitis C, and the best time to start is early – before hepatitis C has a chance to damage your liver.

One of the most important things you can do is to stop or cut down on drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco. There are also medicines to cure hepatitis C and they work in up to 100% of the people who take them. Talk with your doctor or nurse about ways to stay healthy and about medications to treat hepatitis C, and if you should be treated.

• The government estimates that there are more than 4 million Americans infected with hepatitis C. However, some experts believe that the number of Americans infected with hepatitis C is closer to 5 to 6 million Americans.

• More than 19,000 Americans die every year as the result of hepatitis C. It is expected that the number of people in the next 10 years who will die from hepatitis C will be 3 times more than now.

• Hepatitis C is so common that it is one of the main reason that people need liver transplants.

• Anyone with hepatitis C should try to stop drinking or cut down on drinking and smoking tobacco.

• People with hepatitis C should be given shots to protect them from hepatitis A and hepatitis B, if not immune.
The liver is the largest organ in your body. It is reddish-brown and is about the size of a football. The really amazing thing about the liver is that if they took away half the liver – it would grow back in a few weeks.

The liver’s job is to run over 500 bodily functions to keep you healthy. It is also a very important organ because it filters everything you eat and breathe – even things that get on your skin. The problem is that things such as alcohol, street drugs, cigarette smoke, toxic fumes, some herbs and even some regular medicines people buy without a doctor’s prescription can damage the liver.

The liver helps the body by taking certain foods and turning them into chemicals that give you energy and keep you healthy.

The liver also stores many important things such as vitamins. Sometimes you can take too many vitamins and this can damage the liver.

HEALTHY LIVER TIPS

- Stay away from toxic fumes or liquids.
- Stop drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco and taking street drugs. If you can’t stop, try to cut back – talk with a doctor, counselor, family or friends about getting some help to stop.
- Eat a healthy and well-balanced diet.
- Talk to your doctor about vaccines to help protect the liver, if needed.
- Tell your doctor about all medicines you are taking, even if it’s just an aspirin, vitamin, herb or Tylenol.
- Drink lots of water.
- Stay away from raw or undercooked shellfish.

How Do You Give or Get Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is spread by direct blood-to-blood contact. This means that in order for someone to give hepatitis C to someone else they must get their blood into someone else’s bloodstream. For this reason, it is difficult to get or give hepatitis C unless there is blood involved. So if you have hepatitis C, make sure that your blood does not come into contact with anyone. If you do not have hepatitis C, stay safe by making sure that you stay away from any other people’s blood.
Getting Hepatitis C

...from Needles & Works
The most common way that people get hepatitis C is from sharing needles and anything else that is used to inject street drugs, hormones, steroids, vitamins or any other substance that is injected into the body. Things used to inject drugs include needles, cookers (to mix drugs), cottons (to filter drugs), and tourniquets or ties. Even the water used to clean drug equipment can have hepatitis C in it. It is also important to wash your hands to help reduce the risk of getting hepatitis C and other diseases.

...from Sex
Getting hepatitis C by having sex isn’t very common, but it could happen if someone has sex with a lot of different people and/or engages in risky behavior – especially “rough sex” and other sexual practices that involve blood. Many experts believe that the risk of spreading hepatitis C is very low if people have sex with only one person over many years. But if the person with hepatitis C or the person you are having sex is worried about catching hepatitis C then use condoms (rubbers) during sex. People who have many sex partners or who have other sexual diseases should always use rubbers and take other precautions, such as covering any open cuts or wounds since these could pass hepatitis C during sex. Hepatitis C is also easier to spread while a woman is on her period. Remember to be safe if there is any blood during sex.

...from Blood
Another way that many people got hepatitis C is from having a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992. This can include having an operation that required someone to receive blood from another person or any other way where a blood product was used.

...other Ways to Get Hepatitis C
Some experts believe that you can get hepatitis C in other ways, such as by getting a tattoo or piercing or sharing personal hygiene items (toothbrushes, razor blades, nail clippers). Although there has never been a proven case of this happening, it remains a very real concern.

The Good News
The good news is that you can not get or give hepatitis C by sneezing, hugging, breastfeeding, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses. It is just not spread by this type of casual contact.
What Are The Tests For Hepatitis C?

There are tests to find out if you have hepatitis C. The first test is to find out if you have ever been infected with HCV. This is called an antibody test. This test only tells you if you have ever been infected. It does not tell you if you actually have the hepatitis C virus in your blood now. There are many other tests used to help find out what is going on in your liver and how sick or healthy you may be.

**Antibody Test**
When the hepatitis C virus enters your body, your immune system releases chemicals into your bloodstream to help fight off the hepatitis C virus. These are called antibodies. If you have hepatitis C antibodies it means that you have been infected with hepatitis C at one time, but it does not mean that you have the hepatitis C virus in your body now. For some people (about 2 to 3 people out of 10) the body’s natural defenses can get rid of the virus, but for the other 7 to 8 people the body cannot kill off this virus.

**Hepatitis C Viral Load Test**
There is a blood test that looks to see if it can find the virus in you. It is called a hepatitis C viral load test. There are two reasons this test is done. The first reason is to tell you whether you still have the virus in your body. The other important reason for having a viral load test is for treatment. It can help tell you whether the medicines are working.

The really important thing to remember is that the amount of hepatitis C virus you have in your body does not mean how sick you are. For this reason it is not a very good test to monitor or tell you how much the hepatitis C virus is damaging your body.

**ALT Levels**
One of the most common blood tests used is a blood test that measures a certain chemical in your blood called ALT. This chemical is released by the liver into the blood when the liver is damaged or sick. High levels of ALT can be caused by many things like alcohol, drugs, toxins, and viruses such as hepatitis C.

Unfortunately, it is not a perfect test for people with HCV – most people with what we call “normal” ALT levels will have little damage, but some people can still have ongoing liver damage.

**Genotypes: Different Kinds of Hepatitis C**
Not everyone with hepatitis C has the same kind. In fact, there are seven different kinds of hepatitis C. These different kinds of hepatitis C are called genotypes and are numbered 1 to 7. The genotype test is a blood test.

Knowing the genotype you have is really important to your doctor because some genotypes are treated with different hepatitis C drug combinations.
What Are The Tests For Hepatitis C?

**Other Blood Tests**
There are many blood tests that are used to see how well your liver is working. These tests will look at many types of chemicals that the liver produces and releases into your bloodstream.

**Liver Biopsy**
A liver biopsy is one the best ways to find out if your liver is healthy or damaged. It is also one the best ways for your doctor to know whether you have other liver conditions.

During a liver biopsy, a needle is put into your liver and a small sample of liver tissue is taken out. Try not to worry too much because most people only have mild to moderate pain. If you are nervous about the test, ask you doctor for some medicine to help you relax. The liver biopsy is done while you are awake. Sometimes an ultrasound is also performed to take a picture of the liver. This will help to decide where to put the needle for the biopsy.

**FibroScan**
A Fibroscan is a machine that sends waves through the liver. The machine will measure how long it takes for the waves to travel through the liver to determine how much damage has occurred in the liver. It is not a perfect test but it can be combined with certain blood tests to provide an accuracy rate up to 90%. The benefit of the Fibroscan is that it is a pain free test.

**Blood Tests**
There are many blood tests that can help to gauge the health or damage of the liver. Talk with your doctor or nurse about which one is right for you. The benefit of blood tests that they are pain free.

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**SAFETY TIPS**

- Do not share needles or works (cottons, cookers, ties) used to inject drugs, hormones, steroids and vitamins. Do not even share the water. Wash hands before injecting.
- Cover any open cuts or wounds.
- Sexual transmission is low, but the use of condoms and barriers will help reduce the risk even more.
- A mother can transmit hepatitis C to her baby during pregnancy or birth, but this doesn’t happen very often.
- Do not share any straws to snort drugs, or pipes to smoke crack.
- Make sure that in healthcare settings standard safety precautions are being carefully followed.
- Do not share any personal hygiene items such as razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers or pierced earrings. Cover personal items and keep them separate from other people you live with.
- Make sure tattoo and piercing equipment is sterile. For a tattoo – make sure that a new needle and ink pot is used for each person. For a piercing – make sure that a new needle is used and that the package that contains the needle is opened up in front of you.
What Are The Symptoms?

Some people with hepatitis C have no symptoms but others can have many symptoms. The most common symptom people with hepatitis C say they have is feeling tired a lot (fatigue). Other symptoms people with hepatitis C report are feeling sick to the stomach, and aches and pains in their muscles, joints, stomach, and liver. Some people have fevers and may sweat in their sleep. Others say that they feel depressed or worried all the time. Still others say that they can’t think or remember as well as they used to before getting hepatitis C. These types of symptoms can be very troubling and they should be reported to your doctor to make sure that they are from hepatitis C and not from another illness or condition. The good news is that for most people with these types of symptoms it may not mean that you are getting any sicker – it may just mean that your body is fighting hepatitis C. But talk to your doctor about any of these symptoms you are having to make sure they are not serious.

There are other symptoms that people can have if their liver is really damaged and scarred. The term for this condition is called cirrhosis (sir-oh-sis). When you develop cirrhosis the liver cannot perform many of its important functions. There will be many warning signs and symptoms that your doctor will need to know about. For this reason it is important to have regular check-ups with your doctor to keep an eye on you more closely and treat you for some of the symptoms.

CIRRHOSIS OF THE LIVER

COMPENSATED CIRRHOSIS
means that the liver is really scarred but can still do many of its important functions to keep you healthy; people with compensated cirrhosis may have few or no symptoms.

DECOMPENSATED CIRRHOSIS
means that there is so much scarring that the liver can no longer do its job. People who have this type of severe scarring can develop many signs and symptoms such as bleeding from the blood vessels in the throat, retaining a large amount of fluid or liquid around the stomach, and even a type of brain disease that causes mental confusion.
What About Herbs?

Some people with hepatitis C take herbs and vitamins. There are some herbs and vitamins that some doctors consider “safe” and other herbs and vitamins that should not be taken because they can damage the liver. Since herbs are like medicines it is very important that you talk with your doctor before taking any herbs or high doses of vitamins.

SOME TIPS ABOUT HERBS & VITAMINS

✓ Some people think that since herbs are natural that they should take them—but just because an herb is natural does not mean that it is safe. Some herbs can make you sick and damage the liver.

✓ Do not take more herbs or vitamins than you are instructed to take.

✓ Get advice about herbs from experts—medical doctors and herbal doctors.

How Do I Stay Healthy?

There are many ways to stay healthy. Here’s our top ten list of things you can do to stay healthy

1. See your doctor and nurse for regular check-ups. Make sure you tell them of any problems or symptoms you are having. Talk to them about medicines to treat hepatitis C.

2. Eat a healthy and balanced diet with lots of vegetables and fruits, and try to stay away from too much sugar, salt and fatty food. Balance the amount of food you eat with regular exercise such as walking.

3. Stay away from or protect yourself from chemicals. Avoid chemical fumes because they could damage the liver.

4. Rest when you are tired. Try to find time during the day for a short nap or times you can unwind and relax.

5. Get the hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccines if you are not already immune. You won’t want to get another illness that might make your hepatitis C worse.

6. Cut down or stop drinking alcohol. If you can’t stop drinking, cut down on the amount of alcohol you drink and ask for help on ways to stop drinking alcohol.

7. Be careful when mixing alcohol, drugs or herbs or when using over-the-counter drugs such as Tylenol, aspirin, and ibuprofen.

8. Join a support group. A support group can help you with emotional problems and give you information about how best to take care of yourself.

9. Try to do things that help you cut down on stress and to keep a positive attitude, such as meditation and prayer.

10. Try not to worry too much. Learn as much as you can about hepatitis C so that you know what you are facing.
Will I Get Sick?

Many people with hepatitis C can lead normal lives and will die of something other than hepatitis C. However, some people with hepatitis C will get very sick, but this usually takes years. The damage caused by hepatitis C usually takes place in the liver. When the hepatitis C virus gets into the liver it can irritate it and cause it to become inflamed. The inflammation can lead to the liver becoming scarred, and for some people hepatitis C can lead to a form of cancer of the liver. There is a simple way to estimate how many people will get sick from hepatitis C:

- About 75 out of 100 people who get hepatitis C will develop chronic (long term) infection.
- About 20 people out of the 75 people who have chronic hepatitis C will become very ill or sick. It usually takes years to severely damage the liver.
- About 2-3 people out of the 75 people who have chronic hepatitis C will get liver cancer.

The important point to remember is that hepatitis C usually takes a long time to damage the liver. There are also many things that you can do to stay healthy such as eating a healthy diet, exercising, cutting down or stop drinking alcohol, joining a hepatitis C support group, taking HCV medicines – and many other ways to stay healthy. The most important thing is to see your doctor and nurse on a regular basis.

What About Treatment?

If you are thinking about being treated for hepatitis C, there are many things to think about. The decision to treat should be made by you and your doctor. You will need to know your viral load, genotype and how much your liver is damaged. The good news is that there are medicines to treat hepatitis C that can get rid of the virus in up to 100% of people who take the HCV drugs. There are many medicines to treat hepatitis C. The best way to treat HCV is with a combination of drugs. Talk with your doctor or nurse about treatment and what medications you can take to treat hepatitis C.
Patient Assistance Programs

There are many assistance programs that can help you with the cost of the medicines including the insurance co-payments. Talk to and work closely with your medical provider to access these programs.

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<th>Umbrella Organizations</th>
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<tr>
<td>Good Days</td>
<td>1-877-968-7233</td>
<td><a href="https://www.mygooddays.org/">https://www.mygooddays.org/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Needymeds.org</td>
<td>1-800-503-6897</td>
<td><a href="http://www.needymeds.org">www.needymeds.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Partnership for Prescription Assistance</td>
<td>1-888-477-2669</td>
<td><a href="http://www.pparx.org">www.pparx.org</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patient Advocate Foundation Co-Pay Relief</td>
<td>1-866-512-3861</td>
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<td>AbbVie</td>
<td>1-877-628-9738</td>
<td><a href="https://www.mavyret.com/">https://www.mavyret.com/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>BMS</td>
<td>1-844-442-6663</td>
<td><a href="http://www.daklinza.bmscustomerconnect.com/support">www.daklinza.bmscustomerconnect.com/support</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gilead</td>
<td>1-855-769-7284</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mysupportpath.com/">www.mysupportpath.com/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Merck</td>
<td>1-866-251-6013</td>
<td><a href="http://www.merckhelps.com">www.merckhelps.com</a></td>
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Resources

For more information about HCV, contact the following organizations

- HEP Magazine: www.hep.com
- National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable: NVHR www.nvhr.org
- National HCV Helpline: 877-HELP-4-HEP (877-435-7443)

Visit the HCV Advocate Website for information about hepatitis C including:

- Newly Diagnosed: Information and a printable brochure to help newly diagnosed patients http://hcvadvocate.org/newly-diagnosed/
- Treatment Issues: Treatment-related information: fact sheets about approved medications, side effects, and more http://hcvadvocate.org/treatment/
- Fact Sheets: This lists all of our fact sheets including our Easy C Facts, HCSP Fact Sheets, FAQ, Guides, Coinfection Facts, Chinese Easy C’s, and Tattoos http://hcvadvocate.org/publications/fact-sheets/
- Resources: Disability Benefits, Glossaries (Medical & Herbal), Helpful links including support groups http://hcvadvocate.org/resources/
- Espanol: Fact Sheets in Spanish http://hcvadvocate.org/spanish/
- HBV: A web page dedicated to hepatitis B http://hcvadvocate.org/hbv/
Easy C Facts

100 People
African Americans & HCV
Alcohol and HCV
Antibody Test
Diet
Feeling Tired
Genotype
Get Healthy
Herbs
HIV-HCV Coinfection
Hygiene Items
Immune System
Liver
Mother-to-Child
Natural & Alternative
Medicine
Needle Exchange
Piercing
Prevention
Ribavirin Warning
Sex and Hep C
Sleep
Tattoos
Treatment
Viral Load
What Is ALT?
What Is Cirrhosis?
What Is Hepatitis C?
Whom Should I Tell?

www.hcvadvocate.org