



Hepatitis C – Fact Sheet

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease that results from infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV), which is spread primarily through contact with the blood of an infected person. Hepatitis C can be either “acute” or “chronic.”

Acute Hepatitis C virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis C virus. For most people, acute infection leads to chronic infection.

Chronic Hepatitis C virus infection is a long-term illness that occurs when the hepatitis C virus remains in a person’s body. Hepatitis C virus infection can last a lifetime and lead to serious liver problems, including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer. Approximately, 75-85% of infections become chronic.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of someone else. Hepatitis C can be transmitted by sharing needles and syringes when injecting drugs; from an infected mother to her baby during birth; from a needle stick injury; by having sex without protection with an infected person; or by sharing razors, toothbrushes, and personal care items. Currently in Allegheny County, most hepatitis C infections are acquired through illegal injection drug use.

Hepatitis C virus is not spread by sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, or sneezing. It is not spread through food or water.

What are the symptoms?

Approximately 70-80% of those who get infected do not have symptoms. If any symptoms are present, they can include: jaundice (yellowing of the skin or whites of the eye), fever, vomiting, fatigue, nausea, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, dark urine.

Symptoms often appear 6-7 weeks after exposure but this can range from 2 weeks to 6 months. Only 20-30% of those infected develop symptoms.

Who is at risk of acquiring hepatitis C?

Those at highest risk for hepatitis C are current and past injection drug users, those born between 1945-1965, hemodialysis patients, HIV-infected persons, those currently or previously incarcerated for a long period of time, and children born to mothers infected with hepatitis C virus.

What happens to the liver?

Of those infected, 75-85% will develop chronic hepatitis C virus infection, and of those, approximately 60-70% will go on to develop chronic liver disease, 5-20% will develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) in 20-30 years, and 1-5% will die from cirrhosis or liver cancer.

How can persons with hepatitis C protect their livers?

Those infected with the virus should periodically get checked by a liver specialist. Some precautions to take are avoiding alcohol because it can cause additional liver damage, and checking with your doctor before taking any prescription medications, supplements, or over-the-counter medications.

Getting vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B is also recommended.

Is there a cure?

Yes. An infected person should be evaluated by a physician for liver disease. Treatment is available for chronic infections. For treatment options, consult with your physician and health insurance provider.

Is there a vaccine?

No, there is no vaccine available for hepatitis C.

How can hepatitis C be prevented?

Here are some precautions you can take to prevent getting infected or to stop spreading hepatitis C to others:

- Avoid sharing needles, syringes, or other equipment to inject drugs or medicines
- Avoid sharing personal items such as toothbrushes, nail clippers, or razors
- Use a condom during sex
- Get tested to know your status if you suspect you've been exposed to someone with hepatitis C, if you were born between 1945-1965, or if you have ever injected drugs
- Cover up cuts and open wounds
- Inform your healthcare professional, nurse, and dentist about your hepatitis C so they can take precautions
- Consider the risk of infection from getting a tattoo or body piercing

Additional resources:

FAQ sheets by Centers for Disease Control

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/index.htm>

Information and resources by Pennsylvania Department of Health

http://www.health.pa.gov/My%20Health/Diseases%20and%20Conditions/E-H/HepatitisC/Pages/HepatitisC.aspx#.WPEk0bHD_cs

Community Liver Alliance, a local organization providing support and education to those with hepatitis C

<http://www.communityliveralliance.org/get-the-facts>

Prevention Point Pittsburgh, provides health empowerment services to injection drug users

<http://www.pppgh.org/>

Pittsburgh Aids Task Force, a local organization that provides hepatitis C testing and resources

<http://patf.org/>