



# Hepatitis C Fact Sheet

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV), which is found in the blood of persons who have this disease. HCV is spread primarily by contact with the blood of an infected person.

Hepatitis C is not spread by sneezing, coughing, hugging, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or other casual contact. Hepatitis C is not spread by food or water.

## How serious is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C infection can range in severity from no symptoms to chronic liver damage. Although many individuals never feel sick from the disease, HCV can remain as a lifelong infection. In some cases, individuals with hepatitis C may develop long term complications cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver failure.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people infected with HCV do not have symptoms for years, even decades, following infection. Symptom onset is slow beginning with fatigue, nausea and loss of appetite, stomach pain, diarrhea and fever. Other symptoms include dark or brown urine, light-colored stools and yellowish eyes and skin.

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## How is hepatitis C spread from one person to another?

HCV is spread primarily by direct contact with human blood. People at increased risk for hepatitis C include:

- Injecting drug users
- Hemodialysis patients
- Health care workers
- Sexual contacts of infected persons
- Persons with multiple sex partners
- Recipient of transfusions before July, 1992
- Recipient of clotting factors made before 1987

## What is the risk of hepatitis C transmission from an HCV infected mother to her baby?

Approximately 5% of infants born to HCV infected women contract Hepatitis C. This typically occurs at the time of birth and there is no preventative treatment to combat the exposure. Most infants infected with HCV at the time of birth have no symptoms and do well during childhood. More studies are needed to find out if these infants will be affected by the infection, as they grow older. Although HCV doesn't spread through breast milk, HCV-positive mothers should consider abstaining from breast-feeding if their nipples are cracked or bleeding.

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## How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

There are several blood tests that can determine if a person has been infected with HCV. The doctor may order just one or a combination of these tests.

## Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?

Antiviral drugs such as interferon, used alone or in combination with ribavirin, are approved for the treatment of persons with chronic hepatitis C. However, the antiviral medications do not benefit everyone with hepatitis C.

## Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?

There is not a vaccine for hepatitis C nor is immune globulin (Ig) recommended after exposure.

## Should someone infected with hepatitis C be excluded from work or school?

Persons should not be excluded from work, school, play, and child-care or other settings on the basis of their HCV infection status.

## What can I do to protect myself from becoming infected with hepatitis C?

Avoid activities that involve sharing or reusing needles. This includes injecting recreational drugs or receiving a tattoo/piercing at a parlor that doesn't follow clean needle and sanitary practices. Although rare, HCV can be spread by sexual intercourse.

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Using barrier precautions such as latex condoms can prevent sexual transmission of HCV. Do not share personal care articles including toothbrushes and razors.

### **What can persons with HCV infection do to protect their liver?**

Annual physicals and liver evaluation are necessary to monitor the progress of HCV. Alcohol can aggravate the severity of Hepatitis C infection, therefore alcohol consumption should be avoided. Additionally, they should not start any new medicines or use over the counter, herbal and other medicines without a physician's knowledge. Since hepatitis C can increase the risk of contracting other types of hepatitis, they should consult with a physician about receiving the hepatitis A and B vaccine.

*For further information, contact the  
Oklahoma City-County Health Department  
(405) 425-4437*

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