



## 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 is serious for some persons, but not for others. Most persons who get hepatitis C carry the virus for the rest of their lives. The majority of these persons have some liver damage, but many do not feel sick from the disease. Some persons with liver damage due to hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver failure that may take many years to develop. Others have no-long term effects.

### What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people infected with hepatitis C 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?
- About 5 out of every 100 infants born to HCV infected women become infected. This occurs at the time of birth and there is no treatment that can prevent this from happening. 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. Breast-feeding does not spread HCV. 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?**

Don't ever shoot drugs. If you shoot drugs, stop, and get into a treatment program. If you can't stop, never reuse or share syringes, water or drug works.

HCV can be spread by sex, but this does not occur very often. If you are having sex, but not with one steady

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partner, use barrier precautions such as latex condoms. Do not share toothbrushes, razors or other personal care articles. They might be contaminated with someone else's blood.

Consider the health risk if you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing: You can become infected if: The tools that are used have someone else's blood on them. The artist or piercer doesn't follow good health practices, such as washing hands and using disposable gloves.

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

They must stop using alcohol.

They should not start any new medicines or use over-the-counter, herbal and other medicines without a physician's knowledge.

They should get vaccinated against hepatitis A and discuss the need for hepatitis B vaccination with a doctor. They should get a yearly checkup by a doctor to evaluate their liver health.

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

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