

Viral Hepatitis C and Liver Disease

What Minorities Need To Know

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Excellence in Health Education Programming

Brochure # 7

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What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV), which is found in the blood of persons who have this disease.

Why should you be tested for hepatitis C?

If you test positive for hepatitis C, it is very likely that you have chronic (long-term) liver disease. You will need to see a doctor to determine if you have liver disease and how severe it is. determine if you should be treated for your liver disease. Learn how you can protect your liver from further harm. Learn how you can prevent spreading HCV to others.

What if you don't feel sick?

Many persons who have hepatitis C have no symptoms and feel well. For some persons, the most common symptom is extreme tiredness. The only way to tell if you have been infected with HCV is to have a blood test. About 4 million Americans are infected with HCV and most don't know it. Whether you feel sick or not, you should have a blood test for hepatitis C.

Who else is at risk of getting hepatitis C?

Others at risk of getting hepatitis C are persons who ever injected street drugs, healthcare workers exposed to blood in the workplace, and babies born to infected mothers. HCV also *may* be spread by sex.

If you have hepatitis C you can prevent spreading HCV to others by:

- not donating blood, body organs, other tissue, or sperm.
- not sharing toothbrushes, razors, or other personal care articles that might have blood on them.
- covering cuts or sores on the skin.

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. Most 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, which may take many years to develop. Others have no long-term effects.

If you have hepatitis C you should protect your liver by:

- seeing your doctor regularly.
- not drinking alcohol.
- not taking any medicines, including over-the-counter and herbal medicines, without checking with your doctor.
- getting vaccinated against hepatitis A if you have liver damage.

Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?

Antiviral medicines are approved for the treatment of persons with chronic hepatitis C. Treatment is effective in about 2-3 out of every 10 persons treated. You should check with your doctor to see if treatment would help you.

HCV is NOT spread by:

- sneezing
- hugging
- coughing
- breast feeding
- food or water
- sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses
- casual contact

If you use or inject street drugs:

- Stop and get into a drug treatment program.
- If you cannot stop, do not reuse or share syringes, water, or drug works.
- get vaccinated against hepatitis B and hepatitis A.

If you are having sex, but not with more than one steady partner

- You and your partners can get and spread diseases such as AIDS, hepatitis B, chlamydia, or gonorrhea. Use latex condoms correctly and every time. The surest way to prevent the spread of any disease by sex is not to have sex at all.
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis B

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C

Source: National Center for Infectious Diseases, NIH, 2001