



HEPATITIS C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV) which is found in the blood of persons who have the disease. When first infected, a person will have an acute hepatitis C infection; however, if left undiagnosed and untreated, this can lead to a chronic hepatitis C infection.

Who gets hepatitis C?

Individuals at the highest risk for the HCV infection include:

- People who injected illegal drugs and shared needles or equipment, including those who injected once many years ago
- People who had blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992, when sensitive tests for HCV were introduced for blood screening
- People who received clotting factors made before 1987
- “Baby Boomers” who were born between 1945 and 1965.

Other individuals at risk for HCV include:

- Long-term kidney dialysis patients
- People who snort cocaine and use shared drug equipment
- People with high-risk sexual behavior, multiple partners, and who are infected with a sexually transmitted disease
- People who share toothbrushes, razors, and diabetes lancets with a family member or friends who are HCV-infected
- People who receive a tattoo or body piercing in prison
- Infants born to HCV-infected mothers
- Health care workers who are exposed to a needle stick from an infected HCV patient.

How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood or bodily fluids containing the virus of an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. Infection can occur when diabetes lancets, toothbrushes, razors, needles, and other drug “works” are shared. Sexual transmission can occur especially when blood is present, but is found to be low in long-term, monogamous (one long-term partner) relationships. There is no evidence that the virus is spread through casual contact such as hugging, shaking hands, sharing food, or sharing drinking glasses or eating utensils. HCV is not spread by coughing, sneezing, or breastfeeding.



How long is a person able to spread hepatitis C?

A person who tests positive for HCV can potentially spread the from a few weeks after exposure to life long if the infection becomes chronic.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Approximately 20% of those exposed to HCV develop symptoms. The other 80% show no sign of illness, and it can be 10 to 15 years before they are diagnosed with HCV.

People who recently acquire an acute HCV infection do not usually have symptoms or if they do, they have mild symptoms that are usually not severe enough to need a health care visit. If symptoms do occur, they likely include fever, fatigue, dark urine, clay-colored stool, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, joint pain, and jaundice.

How soon do symptoms appear?

For those who do develop symptoms, the average time from exposure to symptom onset is two to 12 weeks. However, symptoms could occur as far as 26 weeks from exposure.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

No one should be excluded from work or school based on their infection status. There is no evidence of hepatitis C being transmitted to others without blood-to-blood contact.

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

For over 90% of people infected with HCV, treatment can be curative. Treatment typically ranges from eight to 12 weeks of oral therapy regardless of the genotype of the virus. Providers will work with infected persons to determine the best course of treatment.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of hepatitis C?

The best way to prevent the spread of hepatitis C is to know the risks and get tested. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that everyone get tested for hepatitis C regardless of their risk level of contracting the virus.

Resources

CDC, <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/hcvfaq.htm#section1>