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## Fact Sheet

# Hepatitis C

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### **What is Hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver. It can range in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness that attacks the liver. Hepatitis C can be either "acute" or "chronic." It is recommended that everyone over the age of 18 should be tested at least once and annually if at risk for Hepatitis C.

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 can be a lifelong infection if left untreated. Chronic hepatitis C can cause serious liver problems, liver damage, scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), liver cancer and even death.

### **How is Hepatitis C spread?**

Hepatitis C is spread by contact with blood from an infected person. The most common ways the virus is spread is through sharing needles used for injecting drugs or medication and accidental needle sticks among health care workers. It can also be spread through unsanitary tattooing or piercing practices, sharing razors or toothbrushes, from receiving a blood transfusion prior to 1992, or from mother to child. It is spread rarely by sexual contact. It is not transmitted by casual contact such as coughing, kissing, sneezing or sharing food, beverages or utensils.

### **What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?**

Only 20%-30% of newly infected people develop symptoms of acute illness. Symptoms of hepatitis C include loss of appetite, fever, nausea and vomiting, extreme fatigue, stomach pain, dark-colored urine, clay-colored stools or yellowing of the skin or eyes. Some people may have no symptoms.

Early symptoms of hepatitis C appear from 2-12 weeks after exposure, usually within twelve weeks. Most people who are infected with hepatitis C have no symptoms and can infect others without knowing it.

A person may be contagious one week or more before the onset of the first symptoms. This chronic infection may be lifelong. A person infected with hepatitis C may also be able to give the disease to others for the rest of their lives if not successfully treated.

## **What is the treatment for Hepatitis C?**

Treatment is recommended for all people, including non-pregnant women, with acute or chronic hepatitis C (including children aged at least 3 years and adolescents). Current treatments usually involve just 8-12 weeks of oral therapy (pills) and cure over 90% with few side effects. In the past, only specialists such as gastroenterologists and infectious disease physicians could prescribe treatment. As of 2021, any primary care provider can prescribe treatment for hepatitis C. Once successfully treated, the person is considered cured. However, a person may be reinfected with Hepatitis C if their risk factors continue.

## **Are there complications from Hepatitis C?**

Chronic Hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer, or even death. It is the leading cause of cirrhosis and liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplantation in the United States.

## **How can Hepatitis C be prevented?**

There is not a vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C. Some strategies to avoid contracting the virus include:

- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or other personal items that may become contaminated with blood or body fluids.
- Avoid direct contact with another person's blood or body fluids. If a surface is contaminated, wear latex gloves and clean with a water/bleach solution.
- Do not use illegal intravenous drugs and never share needles or other drug use equipment (straws, snort tubes).
- If you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing, remember that you can get infected if the tools have not been cleaned properly or if the artist does not wear clean gloves or use clean inks with each new customer.
- Practice safer sex. A mutually faithful relationship with one other person is safest. Use a new latex condom every time you have sex.

## **How do I get more information on hepatitis C?**

Calhoun County Public Health Department

Phone: 269-969-6383

 [www.facebook.com/CCPublicHealthDepartment/](https://www.facebook.com/CCPublicHealthDepartment/)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Phone: 800-232-4636 (800-CDC-INFO)

Website: [www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/index.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/index.htm)

Spanish: [www.cdc.gov/spanish/especialesCDC/hepatitis/](https://www.cdc.gov/spanish/especialesCDC/hepatitis/)

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