

# Hepatitis C

## If You Have Hepatitis C Infection

### **What is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a disease that affects your liver. It is caused by a virus, called the hepatitis C virus or HCV for short. According to government estimates, almost 4 million people in the United States have hepatitis C.

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

The symptoms of hepatitis C infection are often very mild. Some people with hepatitis C feel tired or have an upset stomach. Others may not have any symptoms at all. Even if you do not have any symptoms, hepatitis C is a serious illness. In most cases, once you have hepatitis C it never goes away. Over time, it can cause other health problems, such as cirrhosis (or *scarring of the liver*) and liver cancer. Finally, because it stays in your body, you can give hepatitis C to someone else.

### **How did I get hepatitis C?**

You probably got hepatitis C by coming in contact with the blood of another person who is infected. Some of the ways this might have happened include the following:

- You had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992.
- You shared needles or works to inject drugs, even if it was only once, many years ago.
- You were on long-term kidney dialysis.
- You were a health care worker and had contact with blood on the job.

- Your mother had hepatitis C when she gave birth to you.
- You have had many sexual partners.
- You have had tattoos and body piercings.

### **How can I protect others from getting hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is mainly spread through the blood. You cannot give hepatitis C to someone else by

- holding hands
- hugging or kissing
- sneezing or coughing
- sharing food or water
- sharing eating utensils
- sharing drinking glasses



To protect others from getting hepatitis C, follow these rules:

- Do not donate blood, body organs, tissues, or sperm.
- Do not let anyone else use your razor, toothbrush, or other personal care items.
- Cover open cuts or sores on your skin with a bandage until they have healed.
- Don't inject drugs. If you shoot drugs, talk with your doctor about trying to stop. If you can't stop, don't ever share your needles or works with anyone else.
- Practice safe sex. Use a latex barrier, such as a condom (or *rubber*) every

time you have sex. Using condoms also reduces your chances of getting some sexually transmitted diseases.

Following these suggestions can also help protect you from other diseases, such as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis B virus (HBV). Talk with your doctor if you would like more information about these and other viruses.

### **How can I keep hepatitis C from causing serious damage to my liver?**

The symptoms of hepatitis C infection are mild, but over time, the virus can damage your liver. You can help prevent this damage from getting serious by following your doctor's advice. Here are some important tips to keep your liver healthy:

- ~ **Do not drink alcohol.** Alcohol damages your liver even when you are healthy. Drinking alcohol when you have hepatitis C makes the damage much worse. Remember, there is no "safe" amount of alcohol you can drink when you have hepatitis C. It does not help to switch from "hard" liquor to beer, cider, or wine. If you need help to stop drinking alcohol, talk with your doctor.
- ~ **Get vaccinated against other hepatitis viruses.** Having hepatitis C does not mean that you can't get other kinds of hepatitis. Talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated (or *shots*) to protect you from hepatitis A and B.
- ~ **Avoid taking medicines, supplements, or natural or herbal remedies that might cause more damage to your liver.** Even ordinary pain relievers can cause liver damage in some people. Check with your doctor before you

take any natural or herbal remedy, supplement, prescription, or non-prescription medicine.

### ~ **Ask your doctor about tests to see if your liver has already been damaged by hepatitis C.**

These tests might include a liver biopsy, a medical procedure that allows your doctor to look at a very small part of your liver for signs of trouble.

### ~ **Ask your doctor about treatments.**

Some of the treatments for hepatitis C include interferon and interferon combined with ribavirin. Find out more about these treatments, and discuss any questions with your doctor.

### ~ **Get involved with organizations or support groups for hepatitis C in your area.**

If you need help finding one, ask your doctor for a list of local resources.

### **Who can I contact for more information?**

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at <http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line at 1-888-4 HEPACDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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Public Health Strategic Health Care Group (13B)  
Veterans Health Administration  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20420  
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