

Hepatitis C

Information for Veterans

What is hepatitis?

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. Toxins, certain drugs, some diseases, heavy alcohol use, and bacterial and viral infections all can cause hepatitis.

Viral infections include hepatitis A (HAV), hepatitis B (HBV), and hepatitis C (HCV).

What is hepatitis C?

- ▶ It is a contagious liver disease that damages the liver.
- ▶ It can be acute, lasting only a few weeks, in 15-25% of individuals, resulting in a mild illness.
- ▶ It can be chronic (lifelong) unless successfully treated, resulting in liver damage, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), and liver cancer.
- ▶ It is spread through contact with the blood of an infected person.

People who have chronic HCV often have no symptoms and can live for many years without feeling sick.

Symptoms of acute HCV include fever, fatigue, nausea, abdominal pain, dark urine, jaundice (yellow skin and eyes), and joint pain.

Symptoms of chronic HCV include jaundice, gastrointestinal bleeding, ascites (swelling of the abdomen with fluid), and mental changes (confusion, sleepiness).



How many people have hepatitis C infection?

- ▶ About 3 million people in the United States have chronic HCV.
- ▶ Veterans enrolled for care at VA have higher rates (5.4%) of HCV infection than the general U.S. population (1.8%).

What are the long-term effects of hepatitis C?

Of every 100 people infected with HCV, about:

- ▶ 5-85 will develop chronic HCV
- ▶ 5-20 will develop cirrhosis
- ▶ 1-5 will die from cirrhosis or liver cancer

In the United States, about 19,000 people die each year from HCV-related liver disease.

Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C testing is recommended for all adults aged 18–79. Talk to your provider about additional risk factors that may require more regular screening.

Can hepatitis C infection be spread by sexual contact?

Yes, but the risk of getting HCV from sexual contact is believed to be low. The risk increases for those who have multiple sex partners, have a sexually transmitted infection, engage in “rough sex” or other activities that might cause bleeding, or are infected with HIV. More research is needed to understand how and when HCV can be spread by sexual contact.

Can hepatitis C infection be spread within a household?

- ▶ Yes, but this does not occur very often
- ▶ It can be spread by the blood of an infected household member
- ▶ If you live with someone who has HCV infection, you should not share personal care items such as razors or toothbrushes

New hepatitis C treatments can cure most people with minimal side effects. VA has cured over 100,000 Veterans of hepatitis C!

How is hepatitis C infection treated?

- ▶ There are several oral medications for hepatitis C that have very high success rates with few side effects. In many cases, treatment is completed in as little as 8–12 weeks.

Learn more

Contact your health care provider and ask about hepatitis C testing and treatment.

www.hepatitis.va.gov

www.cdc.gov/knowmorehepatitis