

# Hepatitis C

## FACT SHEET



Washtenaw County  
Health Department

### What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the *hepatitis C virus* (HCV). The virus is found in the blood of infected people. Many persons who get hepatitis C will become chronically infected. More than half of those who are chronically infected will have liver damage and may eventually develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver tissue) and/or liver cancer. Cirrhosis and liver cancer usually take many years to develop.

### What are the symptoms?

- Yellowing of the skin & eyes
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever
- Extreme fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Clay-colored bowel movements
- Dark urine
- Joint pain

Early symptoms of hepatitis C appear from 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure, usually within 4-12 weeks. But most people who are infected with HCV have no symptoms and can infect others without knowing it.

### How is it spread?

Hepatitis C virus is spread by direct contact with infected blood or body fluids, including blood transfusions. It can be spread through tattooing, body piercing, injecting drugs, needle-sticks, and rarely, through sexual contact. Pregnant women who are infected can pass the virus to their baby. The virus is **not** spread by shaking hands or by hugging.

### You are at risk if you:

- Have ever (even just once) injected illegal drugs
- Have had a job that exposes you to human blood
- Were treated for clotting problems before 1987
- Received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992
- Have multiple sex partners
- Are a family member or housemate of an infected person
- Are infected with HIV

### How is it prevented?

- There is currently NO vaccine for Hepatitis C.
- Don't share needles, toothbrushes, eating utensils or razors that could be contaminated with blood or body fluids.
- If you are a health care worker, follow routine barrier precautions; handle needles and other sharps safely.
- If a surface is contaminated with blood or body fluids, wear latex gloves and mop up or wipe with a disinfectant solution.
- Don't use IV drugs. If you do use IV drugs, stop and get into a treatment program. If you can't stop, NEVER reuse or share your drug works. Contact your local health department for more information on cleaning your works and needle exchange programs.
- If you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing, remember that you can get infected if the tools haven't been cleaned properly or if the artist doesn't wear clean gloves with each new customer.

**HCV can occasionally be spread through sexual contact. Although this does not occur very often, consider protecting yourself by:**

- Having sex with only one person who is only having sex with you.
- Using a new condom with a water-based lubricant every time you have sex.
- Knowing your sex partner's history of IV drug use.

### If you have hepatitis C:

- Don't donate blood, plasma, body parts or sperm.
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B.
- Do not use alcohol or other substances that can harm your liver.

### How is it treated?

- **For Acute Hepatitis C:** There is no current medication for acute Hepatitis C infection. Healthcare providers recommend rest, hydration and proper nutrition.
- **For Chronic Hepatitis C:** New treatments are becoming available. Please consult your medical provider.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*