

# Hepatitis C Facts

## What is hepatitis?

"Hepatitis" means swelling of the liver. The liver is an important organ. It breaks down everything you eat, drink, breathe in, inject or take in through your skin. You can't live without your liver. Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus.

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C or hep C is a virus that infects the liver. Most people do not have symptoms for many years. Over time, hep C can cause the liver to thicken and scar. This scarring is called "fibrosis." As the scarring becomes worse, the liver does not function correctly. The late stage of scarring is called "cirrhosis." Cirrhosis can lead to life-threatening liver failure or liver cancer.

If you or someone you know is diagnosed with hep C, there's good news! There's a cure. Today there are treatments that can cure this virus, and almost everyone who takes their hep C treatment is cured. Treatment with direct-acting antivirals (called "DAAs") can cure hep C, and cure can prevent or slow down liver damage. Learn more about hep C treatment.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Many people with hep C do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. If symptoms occur, they can include: fever, feeling tired, not wanting to eat, upset stomach, throwing up, dark urine, pale-colored stool, joint pain, and yellowing of the skin and eye.

## How is hepatitis C spread?

Hep C is spread when the blood of a person who has the virus enters the body of a person who does not have the virus. Hep C is NOT spread through casual contact, such as sneezing, hugging, or sharing eating or drinking utensils.

## How can hepatitis C be prevented?

Although there is currently no vaccine to prevent hep C, there are ways to reduce the risk of becoming infected with the hep C virus.

**If you use drugs**, sharing tools when injecting or snorting makes you more likely to get hep C. Don't share anything that might have even a trace of blood on it, even if it can't be seen. Don't share needles, ties, water, straws, bills. The hep C virus could be on it. When preparing to inject and injecting, always use new equipment and use only your own. Also, when snorting cocaine or other drugs, use your own straw. If you must re-use something, mark it so you know it's yours and yours alone.

**Always choose a licensed tattoo or body piercing parlor.** When body artists don't follow standard practices to prevent infection, they can spread hep C. If you get a tattoo or a piercing from someone not following proper safety rules, you can get hep C through their needles, tattoo ink, or unsanitary workstations. Make sure your tattoo or piercing artist is licensed by the state and avoid home tattoo and piercing parties unless the artist is a licensed professional.

**Don't share personal care items.** Often people will cut themselves while shaving or their gums will bleed while brushing their teeth. Because even small amounts of blood from a person with hep C can potentially infect someone. Do not share items such as toothbrushes, razors, nail and hair clippers, and scissors. If you have hep C, make sure to keep these items where children can't reach them.

**Practice safer sex.** Hep C can also be spread through sex, although not as easily as through injection drug use. If you are a man who has sex with men with HIV, you are at a risk of getting hep C during sex. This risk is not as easily as during anal intercourse or rough sex. Make sure you use condoms and lots of lube during sex to prevent bleeding. Get tested for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and if you test positive, start treatment right away.

## Who is at risk for getting hepatitis C?

- People who inject drugs, including those who injected only once many years ago
- Recipients of clotting factor concentrates made before 1987, when less advanced methods for manufacturing those products were used
- Recipients of blood transfusions or solid organ transplants prior to July 1992, before better testing of blood donors became available
- Hemodialysis patients
- Health care workers after needle sticks involving blood from someone who is infected with the hep C virus
- Recipients of blood or organs from a donor who tested positive for the hep C virus
- People with HIV infection
- Children born to mothers infected with the hep C virus
- People who are incarcerated
- People who use intranasal drugs
- People who received body piercing or tattoos done with non-sterile instruments

If you think you might have been exposed to hep C but are not sure, then you should get tested. Learn more about the testing process.

## Did you know?

It's estimated that 3.5 million Americans- including over 100,000 New Yorkers have hep C. But more than half of them don't even know they have it.

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