



Hepatitis C

Screening, Diagnosis and Linkage to Care



01

Screening

The first step to finding out if you have hepatitis C is getting screened. Don't wait until you feel sick to get tested.

02

Diagnosis

If your hepatitis C antibody test is reactive, a second test will be needed to diagnose and determine if you are currently infected.

03

Linkage to Care

Once you learn that you are infected with hepatitis C, it is important that you receive proper medical care.

Hepatitis C



Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) and is spread by contact with infected blood. Most people were infected with hepatitis C by injecting drugs. Before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992, hepatitis C was also commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Three-quarters of those infected are baby boomers (born between 1945 and 1965). The majority of people living with hepatitis C don't know they have it. Hepatitis C can cause serious liver damage, including cirrhosis and liver cancer. It is the number one reason for liver transplants in the United States. Liver damage from hepatitis C can be prevented by early diagnosis and timely access to care and treatment.

Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. However, hepatitis C is treatable and curable.

Hepatitis C and HIV Co-Infection

About one quarter of HIV-infected persons are also infected with hepatitis C. Liver disease progresses more quickly in a person co-infected with HIV and HCV. Co-infection with HIV and HCV is common (50%–90%) among HIV-infected injection drug users. HIV positive MSM (men who have sex with men) also appear to be at higher risk of becoming infected with hepatitis C. This could be due to rough sex or anal sex where there is blood present. Hepatitis C can be successfully treated in persons with HIV.



01

Hepatitis C Screening

01

You should get tested for hepatitis C if you:

- Injected drugs, even just once many years ago.
- Were born from 1945 through 1965*.
- Received donated blood or organs before 1992.
- Received clotting factor before 1987.
- Are HIV positive.
- Were exposed to blood on the job through a needle stick or injury with a sharp object.
- Were ever on long-term dialysis.
- Got a tattoo or body piercing from an unlicensed artist, such as on the street or while in jail.
- Snorted drugs.

* In New York State, primary care providers are required by law to offer anyone born between 1945 and 1965 a hepatitis C screening test.

Hepatitis C Antibody Test

The first test you need to determine if you have hepatitis C is a hepatitis C antibody test. This is a blood test that looks for antibodies to the hepatitis C virus. The test can be done by collecting a blood sample and sending it to a lab, or by a finger stick using a hepatitis C rapid antibody test. The hepatitis C antibody test will tell you if you have ever been infected with hepatitis C. It will **not** tell you if you have hepatitis C now. You will need a second test to know if you are currently infected.

A hepatitis C antibody test result can be either Non-Reactive/Negative or Reactive/Positive.

- **A non-reactive or negative** antibody test means that you are not currently infected with the hepatitis C virus. However, if you have engaged in risky behavior such as sharing injection drug equipment in the last 6 months, you will need to be tested again.
- **A reactive or positive** antibody test means that you have antibodies to hepatitis C in your blood. You were exposed to hepatitis C at one time. You may be infected with hepatitis C. You will need a second test to know for sure.



02

Hepatitis C Diagnosis

02

If your hepatitis C antibody test is reactive, a second test will be needed to diagnose and determine if you are currently infected. This second test is called an HCV RNA test. Another name for this test is an HCV PCR test. The RNA test checks for the presence or amount of hepatitis C virus in your blood. An HCV RNA test result can either be undetectable or detectable. Sometimes the result may also be reported as a viral load (the amount of virus in your blood).

- **An undetectable test** result means you don't have virus in your blood and are not currently infected.
- **A detectable test result** means that you have hepatitis C virus in your blood and that you are currently infected with hepatitis C. This test result may also show your viral load.

Benefits of Early Diagnosis of Hepatitis C

Early diagnosis and medical monitoring are key to better health outcomes. Even without treatment, there's a lot you can do to stay healthy and protect your liver from damage.

- Avoid or reduce your alcohol consumption.
- Make sure you are vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.
- Eat healthy, exercise and get enough rest.
- See your health care provider for regular check-ups.
- Ask your doctor before taking any prescription, over-the-counter medications, supplements or vitamins.

Minimize Risk of Transmission to Others

- If you inject illegal drugs, the best choice is to stop. If you are going to inject drugs, do it as safely as you can. Do not share needles or any other injection equipment (syringes, cotton, cooker, water, etc.).
- Do not share personal care items that may have blood on them such as razors, toothbrushes or nail clippers.
- Do not donate blood, tissue or semen.
- Practice safer sex by using condoms or dental dams. Avoid sex with blood exposure or tearing of tissues.

Hepatitis C is **not** spread through casual contact such as: sneezing, coughing, hugging and sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses.



03

Linkage to Hepatitis C Care and Treatment



03

Linkage to Care

Once you learn that you are infected with hepatitis C, it is important that you receive proper medical care. A health care provider can monitor your liver disease. They can also give you advice on how to take care of your liver and information on hepatitis C treatments.

Hepatitis C Treatment

- Hepatitis C is curable in many cases. Medications now available for the treatment of hepatitis C are more successful, have fewer side effects and the length of treatment is shorter (12-24 weeks). Some people are even able to be treated without interferon. Interferon is an injectable medication used to treat hepatitis C and causes many of the side effects associated with hepatitis C treatment. More treatment options will also be available in the future.
- If you are treated successfully, the virus can be eliminated from your body. This is called a sustained viral response or SVR. A SVR reduces your risk of dying before you need to and improves your quality of life. It's important to know that even if you are successfully treated, you are not protected from getting re-infected with hepatitis C in the future.
- Decisions about starting treatment for hepatitis C are based on many factors. Together, you and your health care provider can decide whether treatment is right for you. Talk to your doctor and other people close to you before making a decision.

To find out more information about hepatitis C or to find a syringe exchange program or a drugstore that sells syringes without a prescription, call 1-800-522-5006 or visit www.health.ny.gov.

To find help for drug use, alcoholism or problem gambling, call 1-877-8-HOPENY or 1-877-846-7369.

