

Hepatitis C

Do I Need to Be Tested for Hepatitis C?

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 the government, almost 4 million people in the United States have hepatitis C.

Why should I get tested for hepatitis C?

The symptoms of hepatitis C infection are often very mild. You may not have any symptoms at all. Still, hepatitis C is a serious illness. If you have hepatitis C, it may never go away. Over time, it can cause health problems, such as cirrhosis (or *scarring of the liver*) and liver cancer. Finally, because it stays in your body, you can give the hepatitis C virus to someone else.

How do I decide if I should get tested for hepatitis C?

Talk with your VA doctor about being tested if

- you ever used a needle to inject drugs, even if it was many years ago;
- you had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992;
- you were a health care worker and had contact with blood on the job;
- you were on long-term kidney dialysis;
- your mother had hepatitis C when she gave birth to you.

In addition, the Veterans Health Administration recommends testing if

- you are a Vietnam-era veteran

- you have had exposure to blood on your skin
- you have had multiple sex partners
- you have tattoos or body piercings
- you have ever snorted cocaine
- you have liver disease
- you have a history of drinking a lot of alcohol
- you have had an abnormal liver function test
- you wish to be tested

What is the test for hepatitis C like?

The test to see if you have hepatitis C is very simple and will only take a few minutes. Your doctor will take a small sample of your blood and send it to a laboratory. You will find out the results in one or two weeks.

Where can I get tested?

Any veteran can get a test for hepatitis C. Call your local VA medical center for an appointment.



If I don't have hepatitis C infection, can I get a vaccine?

No. There is no vaccine (or *shot*) that will keep you from getting hepatitis C. There are vaccines that can protect you from other kinds of hepatitis. Ask your doctor for more information.

How can I protect myself from hepatitis C infection?

There are lots of things you can do to protect yourself from hepatitis C infection. The most important thing is to avoid other people's blood or things that might have other people's blood on them. Here are some suggestions:

~ Don't inject drugs.

If you can't stop, use a clean needle every time, and never share your needle or works with anyone else. Ask your doctor how you can stop using drugs.

~ Practice safe sex.

Use a latex barrier, such as a condom (or *rubber*), every time you have sex. Talk with your sex partner(s) about hepatitis C and other sexually transmitted diseases.

~ If you are a health care worker, follow standard precautions.

Handle needles and other sharps safely. Report every needle stick or other injury on the job to your supervisor.

~ Don't share personal items that might have blood on them.

These items include razors, toothbrushes, and personal medical supplies.

~ Talk with your doctor about hepatitis C.

Your doctor can provide you with more information about how to protect yourself from hepatitis C infection.

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

What are some ways hepatitis C is NOT spread?

Hepatitis C is mainly spread through blood.

You cannot get hepatitis C from

- holding someone's hand
- hugging or kissing someone
- being coughed or sneezed on
- sharing eating utensils
- sharing food
- eating dirty food
- drinking dirty water
- donating blood



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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