

Hepatitis C

HIV and Hepatitis C

What is HIV?

HIV stands for the human immunodeficiency virus. It is the virus that causes AIDS.



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.

What is HIV/hepatitis C co-infection?

Co-infection is a medical term meaning that you have two or more infections in your body at the same time. If you have HIV and hepatitis C co-infection, then you have both HIV and hepatitis C. These two illnesses are very different, so it is important that you learn about both of them.

What do I need to learn about HIV?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. It is spread mainly through the blood and through sexual contact. You can have HIV and feel healthy. Over many years, however, the virus can wear down your body's immune system, making it hard for your body to fight off dangerous infections. Having HIV can also increase your risk of getting certain cancers.

There are many treatments now that can help people with HIV. As a result, many people with HIV are living much longer and healthier lives than before. Even so, there is still no cure for HIV infection. You will want to learn much more about it, so that you can do everything possible to stay healthy. You will also need to learn how to avoid giving HIV to others.

What do I need to learn about hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease of your liver. It is caused by infection with the hepatitis C virus. The virus is mainly spread through contact with infected blood. The symptoms of hepatitis C infection are often very mild. Some people with hepatitis C feel tired or have an upset stomach. Others may not have any symptoms at all. Even if you do not have any symptoms, hepatitis C is still a serious illness. In most cases, if you have hepatitis C, it never goes away. Over time, it can cause other health problems, such as cirrhosis (or *scarring of the liver*) and liver cancer. Finally, because it stays in your body, you can give hepatitis C to someone else.

Can having HIV make hepatitis C worse?

Yes. HIV affects your whole immune system, including your body's ability to fight off hepatitis C. As a result, you might develop a worse case of hepatitis C than someone who doesn't have HIV.

What do I need to know about HIV, hepatitis C, and sex?

HIV is spread by infected blood, semen, and vaginal fluids. Hepatitis C is spread mainly by the blood and rarely by sex. Practicing safe sex is the best way to keep other people from getting HIV. Hepatitis C isn't spread as easily as HIV by having sex. But you can still give hepatitis C to someone you have sex with, if you're not careful. If you have sex, the best thing to do is to practice safer sex all the time. To do so, always use a condom, dental dam, or other latex barrier and avoid "rough sex" or other activities that might cause bleeding.

What do I need to know about HIV, hepatitis C, and drug use?

Sharing needles or works to inject drugs is one of the easiest ways to spread hepatitis C and HIV. By sharing needles or works, you can even spread both of these viruses at the same time. The best thing to do, especially if you have hepatitis C or HIV, is to not use drugs. If you use drugs, make sure that your needle and works are clean (or *brand new*) every time and never share them with anyone else. And, talk to your doctor about getting help to stop.

Is there a cure for hepatitis C?

In some people who are treated for hepatitis C, the virus goes away, but damage to the liver may remain. Talk with your doctor about treatment for hepatitis C. Educate yourself about your treatment choices as much as you can.

What can I do to slow down my HIV and hepatitis C infections?

The best way to keep your co-infection from becoming a serious health problem is to keep yourself and your liver healthy by following these guidelines:

~ Do not drink alcohol.

Alcohol weakens your immune system and damages your liver even when you are healthy. Drinking alcohol when you have HIV and hepatitis C makes the damage much worse. Remember, there is no "safe" amount of alcohol you can drink when you have HIV and hepatitis C. It doesn't help to switch from "hard" liquor to beer, cider, or wine. If you need help to stop drinking alcohol, talk to your doctor.

~ Get vaccinated against other hepatitis viruses.

Having hepatitis C does not mean that you can't get other kinds of hepatitis. Talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated (or *shots*) to protect you from getting hepatitis A and B.

~ Avoid taking medicines, supplements or natural or herbal remedies that might cause more damage to your liver.

Even ordinary pain relievers can cause liver problems in some people. Check with your doctor before you take any natural or herbal remedy, supplement, prescription, or non-prescription medicine. And, make sure your doctor knows all the medicines you are taking for HIV and hepatitis C.

Will having hepatitis C prevent me from getting treated for HIV?

No. But some HIV treatments can damage your liver, so your doctor may want you to try others.

Will having HIV prevent me from getting treated for hepatitis C?

No. But if you have HIV, you might experience worse side effects or other problems when you take medicines for hepatitis C.

What else can I do if I have HIV and hepatitis C co-infection?

Having HIV or hepatitis C alone is difficult enough. Finding out that you have both at the same time might seem overwhelming. Here are some things that can help:

~ Respect your body.

Eat healthy food, drink plenty of water, and get restful sleep. Try to exercise every day.

~ Don't use drugs, drink alcohol, or have unsafe sex.

Remember that drugs and alcohol can make your illness worse. Having unsafe sex can give HIV and hepatitis C to others. Talk with your doctor if you can't stop drinking, taking drugs, or having unsafe sex.

~ Get support.

Ask your doctor where you can get support in your area. If you already get services from an AIDS organization, ask about support groups for people who have HIV and hepatitis C.

~ Stay informed.

HIV and hepatitis C are two of the most important medical issues today. Try to educate yourself about them. Ask your doctor if you need help making sense of anything you hear on the news or read in the newspaper.

~ Follow your doctor's advice.

Follow all instructions you get from your doctor. Try to keep all of your appointments. Call your doctor immediately if you have any problems.

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 HEPCCDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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