

HEPATITIS C:

AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE FOR PATIENTS

www.hepatitis.va.gov



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DEFINITIONS

Advanced Liver Disease

Symptoms of advanced liver disease include: fatigue, difficulty concentrating, yellow jaundice, fluid in the abdomen, bleeding and poor blood clotting.

Chronic Hepatitis C

Disease of the liver that remains throughout the course of the individual's life.

Cirrhosis

Scarring of the liver. It is the end result of damage to the cells in the liver. Cirrhosis can be caused by many things, including viral hepatitis or alcohol, or both.

Fibrosis

Mild to moderate scarring of the liver.

Genotype

Not all hepatitis C viruses are exactly the same. We know of six different genotypes for hepatitis C. Some of them respond better to treatment than others.

Liver Biopsy

A procedure in which a small piece of liver is removed with a needle and examined to find out exactly how much liver damage is present. The biopsy is often rated on a scale from 0 (normal liver) to 4 (cirrhosis).

Liver Cancer

A type of cancer, also known as hepatocellular carcinoma, that develops in the liver as a result of viral hepatitis, cirrhosis or alcohol.

Viral Load

A measure of how much virus can be found in a test tube of blood. It is affected by many things, including alcohol.

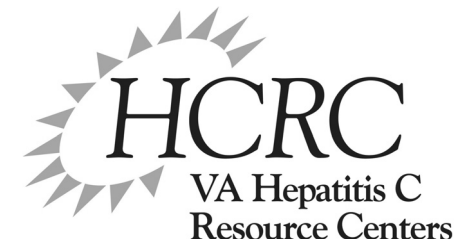
Hepatitis C:

An Introductory Guide for Patients

(October 2009)

VA Hepatitis C Resource Center Program
and Clinical Public Health Programs Office
Veterans Health Administration
U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs

www.hepatitis.va.gov



INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

Information On Hepatitis C and Liver Health Veteran's Administration Hepatitis C Website

<http://www.hepatitis.va.gov>

Centers for Disease Control (-800-4HEPCDC or 1-888-443-7232)

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis>

HCV Advocate

<http://www.hcvadvocate.org>

American Liver Foundation

<http://www.liverfoundation.org>

Information On Alcohol Use and Misuse and Liver Health Alcoholics Anonymous

<http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org>

Centers for Substance Abuse Treatment

<http://csat.samhsa.gov>

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism

<http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>

Alcohol Screening

<http://www.alcoholscreening.org>

HERBS TO AVOID!

If you are curious about alternative and complimentary therapies, then you should ask your health care provider whether or not it would be safe for you to try them.

The herbs listed below are known to be dangerous, which means that they are bad for your liver, especially since you have hepatitis C. You will want to avoid these!

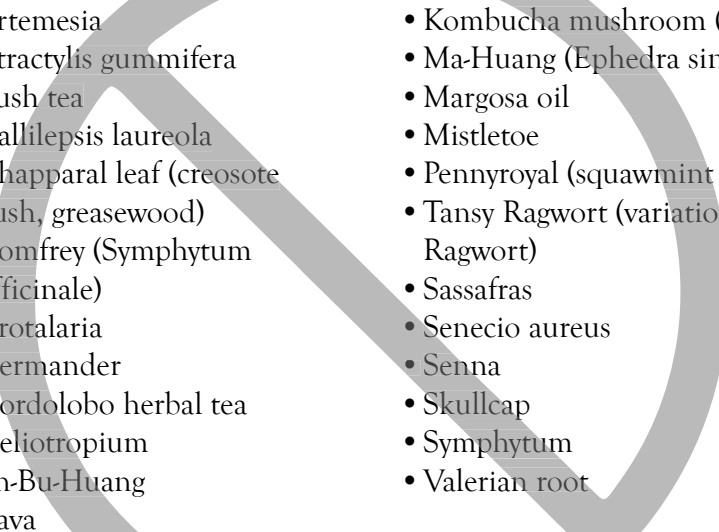
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- Artemesia
 - Atractylis gummifera
 - Bush tea
 - Callilepis laureola
 - Chapparal leaf (creosote bush, greasewood)
 - Comfrey (Symphytum officinale)
 - Crotalaria
 - Germander
 - Gordolobo herbal tea
 - Heliotropium
 - Jin-Bu-Huang
 - Kava
 - Kombucha mushroom (tea)
 - Ma-Huang (Ephedra sinica)
 - Margosa oil
 - Mistletoe
 - Pennyroyal (squawmint oil)
 - Tansy Ragwort (variation of Ragwort)
 - Sassafras
 - Senecio aureus
 - Senna
 - Skullcap
 - Symphytum
 - Valerian root

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Our dedicated patients whose input has helped shape the content and direction of this booklet.

Jason Dominitz and Jeff Paulino are the lead authors of this document.

MAKING A CHANGE PLAN

Setting clearly defined goals can be helpful in making a difficult lifestyle change, such as quitting drinking or smoking. Try filling in the blanks below:

My specific goal is to:

The steps I plan to take in changing are:

Challenges that might interfere:

How I will handle these challenges:

I will know my plan is working if:

USEFUL RESOURCES

On the following pages, you will find some useful resources that can be used to keep track of your liver health, help make a change in your lifestyle to keep your liver functioning, and provide you with more information on hepatitis C. In the back of this booklet, you will find a space to keep other notes and information that may come up during your visits with your primary care provider and/or liver specialist.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Hepatitis C can affect various parts of your life. Many people are surprised to learn that they have been infected with hepatitis C. Some people feel overwhelmed by the changes that they may need to make in their lives.

The purpose of this booklet is to let you know what it means to have hepatitis C and what you can do to keep your liver healthy. It may answer some of the questions you have now. However, this booklet is only the beginning and contains only a small amount of the information available. Talk to your health care provider and ask questions whenever you can.

Having support

Patients with hepatitis C sometimes feel isolated, not realizing how many others have their same condition. Here at the VA, and in many hospitals and communities, there are support groups that you can seek out to discuss some of your questions and concerns with others. There are



even online resources now with e-mail bulletin boards and chat groups where individuals share their experiences with hepatitis C. During treatment for hepatitis C, having a support system of friends and family and/or participation in a patient support group can be particularly helpful.

Ask questions!

One thing that we cannot stress enough is, if you don't know about something, don't be afraid to ask. That is what your health care provider is for. If you are unsure about whether something is healthy for you or not, check with your provider first. Write down any questions you might have as you think of them, and take your list of questions to your next appointment.



and emotional health. Getting the right amount of sleep helps to replenish our bodies. Relaxation reduces stress, which is a major factor in most illnesses. Lack of sleep and relaxation can cause mood problems, low energy, and difficulties with thinking, memory, and concentration. Regular rest can help manage pain and insomnia.

Some good tips for getting good sleep include:

- Avoid stimulants, like caffeine, before bedtime
- Avoid alcohol or illicit drug use
- Maintain a regular sleep schedule by going to sleep and waking up at the same times every day
- Don't take naps during the day
- Keep the bed for sleep and sex only
- Make sure your bedding is comfortable
- Don't exercise before bed
- Perform pre-bedtime rituals to ready your mind for sleep (brushing teeth or reading)
- Ask your provider about sleep medications
- Talk to a therapist about thoughts that are keeping you up



Some useful tips for relaxation include:



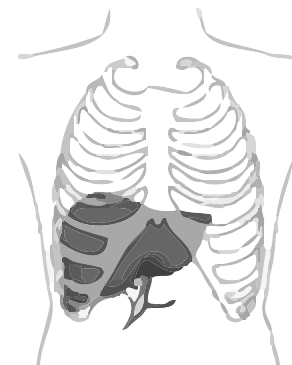
- Drink a hot, non-caffeinated beverage
- Listen to relaxing music
- If there is an activity that relaxes you, do it
- Take a hot bath or shower
- Use aromatherapy: nice smells, like oils, and fresh flowers can relax the body
- Try “movement arts” such as Yoga or Tai Chi
- Meditate
- Practice other relaxation exercises

YOUR LIVER

To understand your hepatitis C infection, there are a few things you should first learn about your liver and how it works.

What is my liver?

Your liver is one of the largest and most important organs in your body. The liver is located behind the lower right part of your ribs. This allows your rib cage to provide a certain level of protection to your liver.



What does my liver do?

Your liver is very important to your health. It acts like a factory, and in other ways, like a filter. Your liver does all of these important jobs:

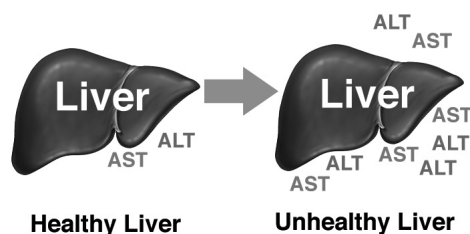
- Stores vitamins, sugars, fats, and other nutrients from the food that you eat
- Makes chemicals that your body needs to stay healthy
- Breaks down harmful things in your body, such as alcohol and other toxic chemicals
- Removes some wastes from your blood
- Makes sure that your body has the right amount of other chemicals that it needs



What happens when the liver is sick?

When the liver does not work well, you can get very sick, or even die if your liver stops working altogether. Now that you have hepatitis C, it is important to remember that your liver may not work as well as it would without hepatitis C. In a healthy liver, the level of enzymes (chemicals that your liver uses to do its work) in your body is normal. ALT and AST are two of these

liver enzymes. These may be higher in patients with hepatitis C. We will discuss the tests used to determine liver health in more depth in the next section.



What are some of the diseases that can affect my liver?

Many diseases can affect your liver. If you have one of these diseases, your liver may not work as well as it should. These are some of the most common diseases that can affect your liver:

- Hepatitis C (the virus you are infected with)
- Viral hepatitis including hepatitis A and hepatitis B
- Alcoholic cirrhosis
- Liver cancer
- Obesity

We will explain these in more detail later.

Other things that can irritate the liver

Other things besides hepatitis C can make your liver unhealthy or put more strain on your liver. Talk with your provider if you use any of the items listed below:

- Alcohol
- Over-the-counter drugs (especially pain relievers)
- Prescription drugs
- Street drugs
- Marijuana
- Tobacco



Eating healthy

Because your liver breaks down everything that you eat, it's important for you to eat well. Try to:

- Eat a well balanced, low fat diet
- Drink water (64 - 96 ounces each day)
- Have adequate protein intake (at least 2.2 - 3.3 oz/lb)
- Increase your fruits and vegetables
- Restrict your sodium intake
- Eat smaller meals when you are hungry
- Strive to maintain a healthy weight
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and iron supplements (iron supplements may be taken if your provider says it is okay)



Getting out and active!

Exercise can lead to an overall improvement in the quality of your life! An exercise program should be concise and realistic. A good goal is life-long exercise to improve strength, endurance, health, lower stress and fatigue. Here are some great tips:

- Exercise regularly (at least 3 times per week for 30 minutes)
- If you aren't used to exercising, it's not too late: start small
- Check with your provider before beginning an exercise routine
- Find something you enjoy to stay active
- Keep an exercise journal to track your progress
- Activities like walking or gardening count too!



Getting some rest and relaxation!

Rest and relaxation are important for our physical, mental,

A HEALTHIER YOU

Being diagnosed with hepatitis C may mean you have to make some changes in your lifestyle, such as:

Alcohol and hepatitis C

One of the most important things that you can do for your health is to avoid alcohol.

Here is why avoiding alcohol is important:

- Alcohol damages or destroys liver cells.
- Your liver has to work harder to process the alcohol, so the virus has more freedom to do damage.
- Alcohol use has been shown to reduce the benefit of hepatitis C treatment, decreasing your chances of clearing the virus.
- If you avoid alcohol, you increase your chances of having little to no liver damage. If you are interested in reducing your drinking, or just figuring out how much you do drink, there are some useful tools in the back of this booklet that may help you.



Your medications

If you start hepatitis C treatment, then it is important to take your medication as directed. The treatment can be difficult and has some unpleasant side-effects. If you are concerned about these, talk with your health care provider. Skipping injections or not taking your pills can greatly reduce the chances of clearing the virus.

LAB TESTS FOR YOUR LIVER

When trying to determine the health of your liver, your health care provider will order a series of lab tests that can give information about whether or not damage to your liver has occurred.

What are some of the tests I will be given?

The most common tests that are used to check how well your liver is working are called Liver Function Tests (LFTs). The most common tests that your provider will order, called a liver panel, are:

- Alanine Aminotransferase (ALT/SGPT)
- Aspartate Aminotransferase (AST/SGOT)
- Total Bilirubin (TBil)
- Albumin
- Prothrombin Time/INR (PT/INR)

The ALT/SGPT Test

This is an enzyme made in liver cells. Basically, if the cells in the liver are damaged, ALT enzymes are released into the bloodstream and result in higher ALT levels on liver function tests.

The ALT level is followed in a patient with hepatitis C. If you undergo hepatitis C treatment, one of your provider's goals will be a more normal ALT level. It is important to remember, however, that while a high ALT may mean a high degree of cell damage, ALT levels can vary and do NOT always reflect the degree of liver cell damage nor do they assess actual function of the liver.

The AST/SGOT Test

This enzyme, much like ALT, is also made in liver cells. High levels of AST can indicate a damaged liver. However, factors not related to liver disease can cause higher AST levels, such as other illnesses or certain medications. With regards to your liver

health, your provider will be most concerned about higher AST levels when they rise alongside higher ALT levels.

The TBil Test

TBil is total bilirubin. Bilirubin usually is removed from the blood by the liver, but when the liver is not working well, bilirubin levels can rise. This test is a true liver function test and higher levels suggest the liver is not working well. Signs of higher levels of bilirubin include yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes (called jaundice).

Albumin

This test measures the amount of albumin, a protein made only in the liver. If the amount of albumin is low, it suggests that the liver may not be functioning well.

Prothrombin Time/INR

This test measures how well your blood clots. If the prothrombin time is elevated, it may mean that the liver cannot produce enough of the clotting protein.

Normal Enzyme Levels

Normal enzyme levels vary at each VA medical center and laboratory. Ask your medical provider for the normal ranges at your facility.

Other Lab Tests

Undoubtedly, your provider will order other lab tests. In fact, your provider will use many tests to follow your care closely and to make sure that your liver is as healthy as it can be given your infection. It is beyond the scope of this booklet to list and explain every possible test that may be ordered for you. If a lab test is ordered that you do not understand, you should ask your provider for more information. **It is important to keep in mind that just because you may have abnormal levels of an enzyme on a test, it doesn't mean your liver is failing. Your provider is there to interpret these tests and to make sure that you remain healthy.**

How can treatment help me?

Anti-viral therapy can eliminate the hepatitis C virus in 23% to 60% of patients. If you do not clear the virus, there are still some ways that treatment can help you:

- decrease the amount of liver damage
- slow the progression of liver disease
- lower the amount of hepatitis C virus in your blood
- improve your liver enzyme levels

What are the side effects of interferon treatment?

Hepatitis C treatment is not without side effects. Side effects are things that might happen in your body because of your treatment. These include, but are not limited to:

- Fatigue
- Flu-like symptoms
- Nausea or vomiting
- Decreased appetite
- Weight loss
- Depression
- Irritability
- Hair loss
- Problems sleeping
- Dry, itchy, or irritated skin
- Problems with thyroid
- Shortness of breath
- Changes in vision
- Decreased red and white blood cells and platelets

Is treatment right for me?

Treatment can be a difficult process for some patients and is, therefore, not recommended for everyone. The decision to seek treatment for your hepatitis C infection is complex and should be based on many factors. If you are interested in treatment, you should discuss this with your provider.

What about alternative and complimentary therapies?

Currently there is not enough research to tell if alternative treatments really help people with hepatitis C. In fact, some herbal supplements can be dangerous for people with liver disease. If you want to try an alternative therapy, we recommend you first discuss alternative therapies with your health care provider.

HEPATITIS C TREATMENT

Now that you know a little about hepatitis C you're probably curious about the treatment available for it:

How is hepatitis C treated?

The most effective treatment is the combination of pegylated interferon and ribavirin. This combination has shown the highest response rate of any treatment for hepatitis C, and is often used at the VA.

What is interferon (IFN)?

Interferon is a protein that helps your body's immune system to attack infected liver cells and to protect healthy liver cells from new infection. Pegylated interferon is taken by injection once per week.

What is ribavirin?

Ribavirin is a medicine that can fight certain viruses, though by itself it does not work against hepatitis C. It is taken in pill form and in combination with the interferon treatment.

How long does treatment take?

In general, anti-viral therapy lasts 24 to 48 weeks. If the treatment is not working or if you have too many side effects, your provider may stop your treatment early.



How effective is treatment?

Your response to treatment depends on several factors, such as what type of hepatitis C virus (called genotype) you have, age, race, weight, extent of liver damage, and amount of virus in the blood (viral load). Response rates for VA patients range from 23% to 60%.

THE HEPATITIS C VIRUS

At this point, you are probably wondering about what hepatitis is. That's understandable. Let's talk about the hepatitis C virus.

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. Approximately 5 million people in the United States are thought to have hepatitis C, making it the most common infection of the blood.

How does hepatitis C cause problems?

Hepatitis C may damage the liver gradually by breaking into a liver cell and inserting its genetic code. It then uses the structure of the liver cells to make more of the virus, essentially turning your liver into a large hepatitis C "factory".

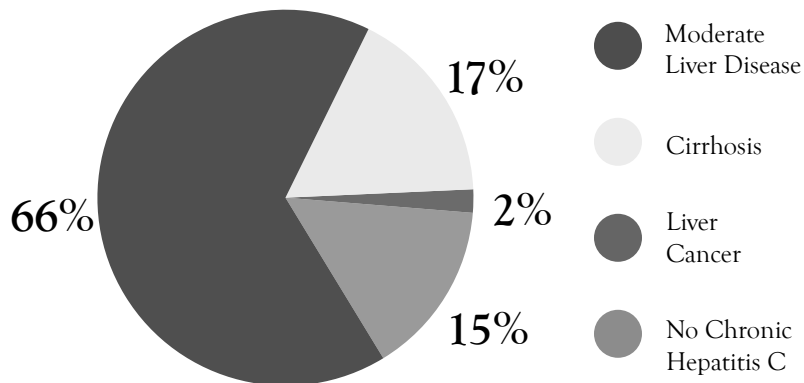
What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

The symptoms of hepatitis C infection are often very mild. Some people can carry the virus for years and not feel any symptoms. Many may feel fatigue or joint pain. Even if you do not have any symptoms, hepatitis C is a serious illness. In most cases, once you have hepatitis C it becomes a chronic infection, meaning it doesn't go away. Over time, it can cause other health problems, such as cirrhosis and liver cancer. Finally, because it stays in your body, you can give hepatitis C to someone else.

What happens to people with hepatitis C?

For every 100 people with hepatitis C, 15 people are able to get rid of the virus by their own immune system, but 85 will develop chronic, or long-term, infection. Of these 85 people, the virus slowly causes liver damage in 66 of them. 17 people will develop cirrhosis and 2 people will develop liver cancer.

- Chronic Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver that remains active throughout the course of the individual's life.
- Cirrhosis is the end result of damage to the cells in the liver, and can be caused by many things including viral hepatitis, alcohol, or other factors.
- Liver Cancer, also known as hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), may develop from cirrhosis related to hepatitis C .



How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Two main tests are used to diagnose and confirm hepatitis C in patients: the antibody test and the PCR test. The antibody test looks to see if you've ever been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. The PCR test confirms that you have active virus in your blood.

case, we recommend you reduce the number of sex partners you have, practice safer sex, and always use latex condoms.

Can I get or give hepatitis C through oral, anal, or other types of sex?

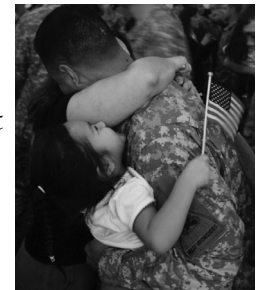
We do not know if the virus can be spread by oral sex. There is no proof that anyone has ever spread the virus through oral sex, although it may be possible.

Anal sex may damage the lining of the rectum and make it easier to pass the virus through the blood. Using condoms during anal sex will help prevent spreading the hepatitis C virus and will also protect you against other sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV and hepatitis B. The presence of blood or a sexually transmitted disease, including HIV, can make it easier to spread the hepatitis C virus during sex.

You *cannot* spread the hepatitis C virus through other types of contact, such as hugging or kissing someone on the cheek.

Can my partner get pregnant, and if so, what is the risk that the baby will get hepatitis C?

It is possible to get pregnant if you or your partner has hepatitis C. If you are a male with hepatitis C, and your female partner does not have hepatitis C (throughout the entire pregnancy), then there is no chance that the baby will contract the virus, from the mother. If you are a pregnant female who already has hepatitis C (or gets hepatitis C at some point during the pregnancy), the chance of passing the virus to your baby is low, less than 5 percent.



The risk becomes greater if the mother has both hepatitis C and HIV. With proper care before the birth, babies born to hepatitis C-positive mothers or fathers are usually quite healthy.

SEX & HEPATITIS C

Many patients wonder if you can get or give the disease through sex. The answer to that is a little complicated...

Basics

If you have hepatitis C, it is not very likely that you will spread the virus through sex, but it is still a small possibility. In addition, some things do increase the risk of transmitting hepatitis C sexually: having more than one sexual partner, having HIV or a sexually transmitted infection, engaging in anal sex, or having sex when blood is present. That is why it is very important to talk honestly and openly with your sex partner(s). Also, talk to your health care provider for more information regarding sex and hepatitis C.



Can I give hepatitis C to my sex partner?

Yes, but it is not likely. Compared to the hepatitis B virus and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), it is less likely that you will spread the hepatitis C virus to your sex partner.

If you have one long-term sex partner and do not engage in anal sex, you do not necessarily need to change your sex habits. But, if either you or your partner is worried about the small chance of spreading the hepatitis C virus, you can use latex condoms. This will make it almost impossible to spread the virus. Partners of people with hepatitis C may wish to be tested for the virus if they are concerned that they also have the virus. If the test is negative, you will probably not need to repeat it.



If you have more than one sex partner, you are more likely to spread the virus. In this

HOW THE VIRUS IS SPREAD

You know what hepatitis C is, and you know what it can do to you, but you're still not sure how you got it and you're worried you might pass it on to someone else...

How did I get hepatitis C?

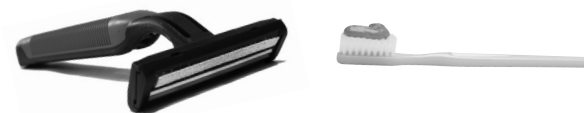
You probably got hepatitis C by coming in contact with the blood of another person who is infected. Some of the ways this might have happened include the following:

- Receiving a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992
- Sharing needles or "works" to inject drugs, even if it was only once, many years ago
- Sharing straws or bills for intranasal cocaine
- Exposure to the virus as a result of being placed on long-term kidney dialysis
- Having contact with blood on the job as a health care worker
- Having a mother who had hepatitis C when she gave birth to you (rare)
- Being exposed to the virus during sexual contact (rare)
- Being exposed to the virus during tattooing and body piercing (rare)

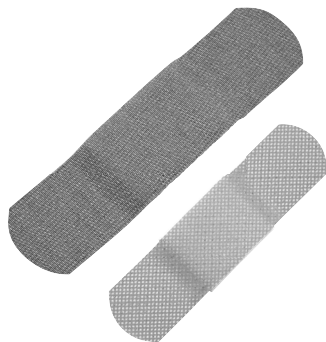
How can I protect others from getting hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is mainly spread through contact with blood. To protect others from getting hepatitis C, follow these rules:

- Do not donate blood, body organs, tissues, or sperm
- Do not let anyone else use your razor, toothbrush, or other personal care items (these items can have small amounts of blood on them)



- Cover open cuts or sores on your skin with a bandage until they have healed
- Don't inject drugs. If you use drugs, talk with your doctor about trying to stop. If you can't stop, don't ever share your needles or works with anyone else
- The hepatitis C virus is not easily transmitted by sex. However, some things do increase the risk of transmitting it sexually, so use a latex barrier, such as a condom (or "rubber"), if you have more than one sexual partner, have HIV or a sexually transmitted infection, engage in anal sex, or have sex when blood is present. Using condoms also reduces your chances of getting some sexually transmitted diseases. We will discuss sex, intimacy and hepatitis C in more depth later in this booklet.



But what if I sneeze, or cough, on someone I care about?

No, you won't spread hepatitis C by sneezing or coughing on someone. In addition, you cannot give hepatitis C to someone else by:

- holding hands
- hugging or kissing (unless you have mouth sores or bleeding gums)
- sharing food or water
- sharing eating utensils
- sharing drinking glasses



contact so that they can be better informed. This topic will be covered more in-depth in the next section.

- Medicines you are taking for hepatitis C so that they can better understand any side effects you might experience.
- Lifestyle changes that you have to make to ensure a healthier liver.

When should I tell them?

Many people share their diagnosis as soon as they find out. Others wait for some time to adjust to the news and get more information. You should share your diagnosis as soon as possible with people who may be directly affected by your diagnosis, such as sex partners or needle-sharing partners. Encourage sex partners and past or present needle-sharing partners to get tested for hepatitis C. When you decide to tell someone, choose a quiet moment when you will have time to talk and ask each other questions.



Do I have to tell?

While we have mentioned that it can be very helpful to share your diagnosis of hepatitis C with others, for support and guidance, you may find yourself in a situation where you feel uncomfortable sharing. Despite the fact that casual day-to-day interactions do not spread the hepatitis C virus, other people might still feel uneasy. It is important to remember that it's okay not to tell people who don't need to know, including employers and co-workers that aren't at risk for getting hepatitis C through their interactions with you.

TELLING OTHERS...

Getting through this time in your life may be difficult and you may want to turn to others for support. But how do you go about that?

Why should I tell people that I have hepatitis C?

If you share your diagnosis with people in your life, they might be able to:

- offer you support and understanding
- understand better how hepatitis C is spread and work with you to prevent the virus from spreading

Who should I tell?

Sharing your diagnosis with others is an important personal decision. It can make a big difference in how you cope with the disease. If you decide to share your diagnosis, it is best to tell people you trust or people directly affected. People you may want to tell include:



- sex partner(s)
- past or present needle-sharing partners
- roommates or family members
- anyone who may come in contact with your blood
- all your health care providers, such as doctors, nurses, and dentists

What sorts of things should I say?

You may want to begin with when and how you found out that you have hepatitis C. You may want to give information on how the virus is and isn't spread. This booklet may be helpful in informing others. In particular, you should discuss:

- Any shared risk factors that might have led to your hepatitis C, or that might lead them to have hepatitis C.
- The risk of getting hepatitis C through sex and sexual

HEPATITIS A & B

When you become infected with hepatitis C, your liver finds itself under attack and its health becomes compromised. For this reason, you run a greater health risk if you become infected with other forms of hepatitis, such as hepatitis A or hepatitis B.

What is hepatitis A?

The hepatitis A virus is a disease that affects your liver. The virus is usually spread by putting something in your mouth that is contaminated by the stool of another person with hepatitis A. It is usually spread through:

- household contact with an infected person
- sexual contact with an infected person
- eating or drinking contaminated food or water
- sharing eating utensils that are contaminated
- touching contaminated surfaces and then placing your hands near or in the mouth

Most people infected with the virus get well within six months. However, hepatitis A can be serious for older people and people who already have liver disease.

What can I do to prevent hepatitis A?

Get vaccinated

- The best way to prevent hepatitis A is to get vaccinated. The vaccine is very effective and can keep you from ever getting hepatitis A. You will not get hepatitis A from the vaccine. Most people who get the vaccine develop antibodies. Antibodies are cells that your body makes to fight certain diseases. These antibodies will protect you against hepatitis A. If you already got vaccinated or if you are not sure, talk with your provider. Your provider can check to see if you have antibodies against hepatitis A.

Practice good personal hygiene

- Because so many cases of hepatitis A are due to close contact with an infected person, you should always practice good personal hygiene, especially by washing your hands.

Can I get the hepatitis A vaccine at my VA medical center?

Yes, if you are HCV positive, speak with your VA health care provider about the vaccine.

What is hepatitis B?

The hepatitis B virus can affect your liver. In the United States, hepatitis B is primarily spread through sexual contact and intravenous drug use. Fortunately, most people who get hepatitis B can get rid of the virus on their own. But others can develop chronic (or lifelong) hepatitis B.

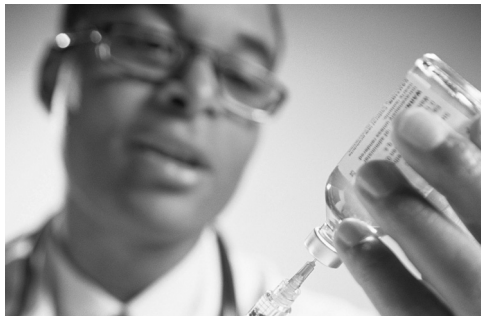
How can I protect myself against hepatitis B?

Avoid high-risk behaviors

- High-risk behaviors increase the chance of infection. These include contact with (or by touching) the blood of a person who has the disease. You can also get hepatitis B by sharing IV or tattoo needles, works, cocaine straws, and through contact with the blood, semen, or vaginal fluids of an infected person.

Get vaccinated

- There is a vaccine that protects you from getting hepatitis B. You get it in three different shots. If you already got vaccinated or if you are not sure, talk with your provider. Your provider can check to see if you have antibodies against hepatitis B.



Practice safer sex

- Use condoms every time you have sex, unless you are in a long-term, monogamous relationship with a known partner who does not have hepatitis B.

Don't shoot/inject street drugs

- If you are using drugs now, try to get help to stop. The VA has programs to help you. If you cannot stop, then don't share needles and works.

Don't share personal care items

- Personal care items such as razors, toothbrushes and nail clippers can sometimes contain small amounts of infected blood.

Is hepatitis B serious?

Yes. Although many people who are exposed to hepatitis B will be able to get rid of the virus, some people can develop chronic (or lifelong) hepatitis B. This may lead to liver damage, cirrhosis, liver cancer, and death.

Is there a cure for chronic hepatitis B?

There are a number of FDA-approved treatments available for hepatitis B, but there is no reliable cure for it.

Can I get vaccinated against hepatitis B at my VA medical center?

Yes, speak with your provider about your risk for hepatitis B. Your provider can check to see if you already have immunity (or are protected) against hepatitis B, and if not, can vaccinate you. It is especially important to get vaccinated against hepatitis B if you have HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) or hepatitis C.

Can I get medicine to treat chronic hepatitis B?

There are a number of different treatment options for patients with hepatitis B. If you have chronic hepatitis B you should speak with your provider to see if treatment is right for you.