

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be affected. Heavy alcohol use, toxins, some medications, and certain medical conditions can cause hepatitis.

Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C. Although all types of viral hepatitis can cause similar symptoms, they are spread in different ways, have different treatments, and some are more serious than others.

All adults, pregnant women, and people with risk factors should get tested for hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus. When someone is first infected with the hepatitis C virus, they can have a very mild illness with few or no symptoms or a serious condition requiring hospitalization. For reasons that are not known, less than half of people who get hepatitis C are able to clear, or get rid of, the virus without treatment in the first 6 months after infection.

Most people who get infected will develop a chronic, or lifelong, infection. Left untreated, chronic hepatitis C can cause serious health problems including liver disease, liver failure, liver cancer, and even death.

How is hepatitis C spread?

The hepatitis C virus is usually spread when someone comes into contact with blood from an infected person. This can happen through:

- ➔ **Sharing drug-injection equipment.** Today, most people become infected with hepatitis C by sharing needles, syringes, or any other equipment used to prepare and inject drugs.
- ➔ **Birth.** Approximately 6% of infants born to infected mothers will get hepatitis C.
- ➔ **Healthcare exposures.** Although uncommon, people can become infected when healthcare professionals do not follow the proper steps needed to prevent the spread of bloodborne infections.
- ➔ **Sex with an infected person.** While uncommon, hepatitis C can spread during sex, though it has been reported more often among men who have sex with men.
- ➔ **Unregulated tattoos or body piercings.** Hepatitis C can spread when getting tattoos or body piercings in unlicensed facilities, informal settings, or with non-sterile instruments.
- ➔ **Sharing personal items.** People can get infected from sharing glucose monitors, razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, and other items that may have come into contact with infected blood, even in amounts too small to see.
- ➔ **Blood transfusions and organ transplants.** Before widespread screening of the blood supply in 1992, hepatitis C was also spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants.

