

# H e p a t i t i s C

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by infection with the hepatitis C virus.

## Who gets hepatitis C?

Anyone can get hepatitis C, but those at greatest risk are:

- Individuals who share needles or syringes with others to inject drugs
- Individuals who received a blood transfusion or an organ transplant from an infected donor prior to July 1992
- Individuals who received clotting factors made before 1987
- Individuals who are on chronic hemodialysis
- Health care workers who received an accidental injury with a needle or a sharp instrument
- Individuals who have sexual contact with an individual who has hepatitis C
- Individuals who have multiple sexual partners
- Infants who are born to mothers who have hepatitis C infection

## How is hepatitis C spread?

The hepatitis C virus is found in the blood and body fluids of an infected person. Blood is the most significant transmission source. The virus is primarily passed from person to person through direct blood-to-blood contact, including mucous membranes or broken skin. Since the implementation of screening tests for hepatitis C, transmission due to blood transfusions and organ donations has declined dramatically. Hepatitis C can also be spread through sexual contact, however, sexual transmission is responsible for a relatively small number of hepatitis C infections. The majority of current transmission is due to injection drug use. Hepatitis C is **not** spread by casual contact or by contaminated food or water.

## **How serious is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C can become a serious illness for some individuals, but not for others. Most individuals who become infected with hepatitis C carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Most of these individuals have some liver damage but many do not feel sick from it. Some individuals may develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver and liver failure which may take many years to develop. Others have no long term effects.

## **What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?**

An individual infected with hepatitis C most often has no symptoms, or may have symptoms such as fatigue, poor appetite, fever and vomiting. A small number of individuals may develop dark colored urine and jaundice (the skin and the white part of the eye become yellow in color).

## **How soon do symptoms occur?**

Most individuals have no symptoms. When symptoms do develop, those symptoms caused by the initial infection with hepatitis C virus usually occur 6 to 9 weeks after exposure but may be delayed for up to 6 months. Symptoms caused by chronic infection with the hepatitis C virus may appear many years after the initial infection.

## **How is hepatitis C diagnosed?**

Hepatitis C is diagnosed by a blood test for the hepatitis C virus or a blood test for antibodies against the hepatitis C virus.

## **Who should be tested for hepatitis C?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that the following individuals should be tested for hepatitis C infection:

- Individuals who ever injected illegal drugs, including those who injected once or a few times many years ago and do not consider themselves as drug users
- Individuals with selected medical conditions, including:
  - persons who received clotting factor concentrates produced before 1987
  - persons who were ever on chronic (long-term) hemodialysis
  - persons with persistently abnormal liver tests
- Prior recipients of transfusions or organ transplants, including:
  - persons who were notified that they received blood from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis C
  - persons who received a transfusion of blood or blood components before July 1992
  - persons who received an organ transplant before July 1992
- Healthcare, emergency medical, and public safety workers after needle sticks, sharps, or mucosal (eye or mouth) exposures to hepatitis C positive blood
- Children born to hepatitis C positive women

In addition to the above, New Jersey Public Law 1998, c. 116 recommends that the following individuals be screened for hepatitis C:

- Veterans of the United States armed forces
- Women who underwent a caesarian section or a premature delivery prior to 1990
- Persons who received blood or blood products prior to 1992
- Persons who received an organ or tissue transplant prior to 1990
- Persons who have received invasive cosmetic procedures, including body piercing and tattooing
- Persons who have a history of multiple sexually transmitted diseases or multiple partners
- Persons with a history of intravenous drug use

## **What is the treatment for hepatitis C?**

Antiviral drugs are available to treat persons with hepatitis C infection. At the present time, after the completion of a course of treatment, about 15% to 45% of patients (depending upon the treatment regimen) continue to have no detectable levels of hepatitis C virus in their blood for six months or longer after the therapy stops. This rate is expected to improve as better drugs and treatment regimens become available. Individuals who are infected with hepatitis C should discuss antiviral therapy with their physician.

## **How long is an infected person infectious to others?**

An infected person is capable of transmitting hepatitis C to others as long as the hepatitis C virus is circulating in his/her blood. For most individuals, this will be for the rest of their lives.

## **What are the long-term consequences of hepatitis C infection?**

The long-term consequences of hepatitis C infection are not completely known. Available information suggests that as many as 10% to 20% of individuals with hepatitis C infection may develop chronic liver disease, such as cirrhosis, within 20 years of their initial infection. There also appears to be an increase in the risk of developing liver cancer.

## **Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?**

There is currently no vaccine for hepatitis C.

## **Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?**

Individuals infected with hepatitis C should not be excluded from work or school, play child-care or any other setting because of their hepatitis C infection. Infected persons should be counseled however, regarding the precautions they should take to reduce the likelihood of exposing other individuals to their blood or body

fluids.

## **How can hepatitis C be prevented?**

- Avoid sharing of toothbrushes, razors, needles and other personal care items
- Cover cuts and open sores
- An individual who has one long-term steady sex partner who is infected with hepatitis C has a very low chance of getting hepatitis C from the partner and it is not necessary for them to change their sexual practices. If, however, they desire to lower the small chance of transmitting hepatitis C to the uninfected partner, they may decide to use latex condoms.
- An individual who has sex with more than one partner should use latex condoms correctly and every time.
- An individual who uses or injects street drugs should stop. If he or she cannot stop, he or she should not reuse or share syringes, water, or drug works.

Source: NJ Department of Health and Senior Services