

What you need to know about hepatitis C

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is an infection that causes liver disease. It is spread through contact with the blood of an infected person—by sharing needles or razors, for example. Hepatitis C is *not* spread by sneezing, hugging, coughing, food or water, or by sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses.

Most people do not have any symptoms of HCV, but some may feel tired, nauseated, or achy. If you are at risk for having HCV, your doctor will send you for blood testing. If the test result is positive, it is important that you take steps to prevent harm to your liver and reduce the risk of infecting others.

Protecting your liver

HCV can cause liver damage. To slow the damage and to prevent serious illness such as cirrhosis and cancer, you should

- Avoid alcohol
- Check with your doctor before taking any new medications (including herbs and over-the-counter medicines)
- Take as directed any medicine your doctor prescribes for HCV. Report any side effects to your doctor immediately
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and/or hepatitis B, if your doctor recommends it.

Preventing the spread of hepatitis C to others

Since HCV is spread through contact with blood, you must be careful not to expose others to your blood. To avoid HCV and other infectious diseases (such as sexually transmitted diseases including HIV), you should also avoid contact with the blood of others. Here are some guidelines:

- Do not shoot up drugs—ever.
- If you do shoot up drugs, seek help. If you cannot quit, never reuse or share needles, water, or other drug accessories.
- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, dental floss, or other personal care items that might have blood on them.
- Cover all cuts and sores on your skin until they are healed.
- Do not donate blood, body organs, or semen.

Support groups may help you cope with the diagnosis of HCV. Your doctor can discuss whether you can take medication that can possibly cure HCV or at least prevent future liver damage. By working with your doctor, you can improve your chances of not letting HCV interfere with your life.

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