

Spotlight on Health

Hepatitis C— Diagnosis and Cure

You have probably seen the television commercials about hepatitis C. Treatments can now cure more than 95% of people who have this disease.¹ New drugs are also better and easier to take than the older ones. But you may not know that you have a hepatitis C infection until it's too late. Hepatitis C damages your liver over time and may even cause liver cancer. By the time you have symptoms, severe damage may have already happened.

Some people are more likely than others to have hepatitis C. Experts say that those people should have a blood test to know if they are infected.²⁻⁵ In this newsletter, we describe hepatitis C, who should be tested, and why testing is important.

Hepatitis C Virus

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis C is a type of liver inflammation that is caused by a virus known as the hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV is spread between people when blood from an infected person enters the body of someone who is not infected.

HCV infections clear up by themselves about 15% to 25% of the time.⁵ But the other 75% to 85% of the time, HCV infections don't go away. These are called chronic HCV infections.⁵ Chronic HCV infections slowly damage your liver. They may even lead to cancer. Most people with a chronic HCV infection do not have any symptoms until it's too late. When they get symptoms, they may already have:

- Liver damage
- Liver failure
- Liver cancer
- Need for a liver transplant

People Who are More Likely to Have Hepatitis C

Two groups of people are more likely to have hepatitis C.

One group is **Baby Boomers**. These are people who were born between 1945 and 1965. Baby boomers are 5 times more likely to have hepatitis C than others.^{2,4} Most people who are infected do not know it. And about 35% who don't know they have hepatitis C already have advanced liver disease.^{2,4} About 75% of people who die from hepatitis C every year are baby boomers.^{2,4} Because this is such a serious problem, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that all baby boomers be tested once for HCV infection.^{3,5}

The other group at high risk of HCV infection are **people who inject drugs**. In recent years there has been a very large increase in HCV infection in injection drug users who are ≤30 years old.^{6,7} In fact, around 30% are infected.⁶



HCV Transmission

HCV is usually spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of someone who is not infected. For example, when⁵:

- People share needles while injecting drugs
- A healthcare worker is accidentally stuck by a contaminated needle
- A baby is born to a mother who has hepatitis C

Less often, hepatitis C can be spread by⁵:

- Sharing personal care items like razors or toothbrushes
- Sexual contact with an infected person, especially men who have sex with men

You should know that HCV is not spread by⁵:

- Sharing food, drink, or eating utensils
- Breastfeeding
- Hugging, kissing, or holding hands
- Coughing or sneezing

Testing and Treatment for HCV Infection Can Save Lives

Testing can detect HCV in people who have no symptoms. This is important for several reasons.

- Most people who have hepatitis C do not know they have it.
- People who have hepatitis C can pass the virus to other people even if they don't look or feel sick. So once a person knows they have hepatitis C they can avoid passing it to another person.
- The earlier you know you have hepatitis C, the sooner you can get treatment and maybe avoid serious liver disease.

In the past, the drugs used to treat hepatitis C only worked less than half the time, and treatment lasted for 6 to 12 months.⁹

Now, new drugs called direct-acting antiviral agents (DAAs) can cure more than 95% of people who have hepatitis C.¹ Also treatment usually only takes 8 to 12 weeks, with fewer side effects.¹ Newer treatments cost less than earlier DAA treatments because of shorter treatment times.

Helping Yourself and Others

If you are a baby boomer, ask your healthcare provider about getting screened for hepatitis C. It is also important to get any follow-up tests your doctor orders.

You can also encourage family members and friends to get tested for hepatitis C if they belong to the high-risk groups.

How the Laboratory Can Help

Simple blood tests are used to test for hepatitis C. A screening test tells whether you have ever been infected with HCV. But the screening test can't tell whether the HCV infection is still active. If the screening test is positive, it is recommended that you have a follow-up blood test called an HCV RNA test. This test determines whether you have an active infection. If the test is positive, you have hepatitis C disease and need treatment. Most laboratories offer this testing from one blood sample.

After you start treatment, blood tests may be ordered at specific times by your doctor. Test results tell the doctor whether the treatment is safely working to clear up your infection.

Additional Information

For more information, visit Quest Diagnostics at QuestDiagnostics.com/home/patients/tests-a-z/hcv/hcv-testing-boomers, or these helpful websites:

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:** cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/cfaq.htm
- **MedlinePlus:** medlineplus.gov/hepatitisc.html
- **American Liver Foundation:** hepc.liverfoundation.org/

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