

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Hepatitis C



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by infection with the Hepatitis C virus (HCV). The virus is found in the blood of people who have this disease. Hepatitis C is a short-term illness for some people, but in 70-80% of those infected, it becomes a long-term, chronic infection. Chronic Hepatitis C can be a serious disease; however majority of infected people might not be aware of their infection because they do not seem ill.

How is Hepatitis C spread?

HCV is spread primarily by direct contact with human blood. Today, most people become infected with Hepatitis C virus by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. For example:

- Injection drug use, such as the needles and/or other equipment used to prepare or inject the drugs that may have come into contact with blood that contains HCV
- On-the-job contact with blood, such as accidental needlesticks for healthcare workers, tattooing or body piercing, if done using unsterilized equipment
- Blood, blood products, or solid organs from a donor whose blood contained HCV (now very unlikely because all blood in the United States has been screened since 1992)
- Children born to an HCV-infected mother

Hepatitis C is not spread by sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, casual contact, breast feeding, sharing food or water, coughing, sneezing, kissing, or hugging. Sex with an HCV-infected person is not an efficient means of transmission; however safe sex practices should always be followed.

What are the symptoms?

Most people who have Hepatitis C show no symptoms or have very mild ones. When symptoms are present, they can include fever, tiredness, dark urine, clay-colored stool (poop), stomach pain, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, joint pain, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin).

Why is it important to be tested for Hepatitis C?

Diagnosis is done through a blood test performed at a doctor's office. Hepatitis C virus testing is recommended for anyone at an increased risk for HCV infection, including:

- People who have ever injected illegal drugs, even only once many years ago
- All people with HIV infection
- People with known exposures to HCV, such as health care workers with needlesticks
- People with signs or symptoms of liver disease
- Children born to HCV-positive mother

If you test positive for Hepatitis C, you may have or develop chronic (long-term) liver disease. You need to see a doctor to:

- Find out if you have liver disease and if you should be treated for it
- Learn how you can protect your liver from further harm
- Learn how you can prevent spreading HCV to others

Is there a vaccine for Hepatitis C?

Currently, there is no vaccine for Hepatitis C.

How is Hepatitis C treated?

Antiviral medications may get rid of the virus and reduce liver disease. If you have Hepatitis C, you should check with your doctor to see if treatment can help.

If I have Hepatitis C, what can I do?

Protect your liver by seeing your doctor regularly; do not drink alcohol; check with your doctor before starting any new medications (including over-the-counter and herbal medicines); and get vaccinated against Hepatitis A and B if you do not already have these infections.

Avoid spreading to others by not donating blood, body organs, other tissues, or sperm; not sharing needles, razors, toothbrushes or other items that may have blood on them; and by covering cuts and sores.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/c
- The American Liver Foundation at www.liverfoundation.org or 1-800-465-4837
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609) 265-5548
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) at www.nj.gov/health