

# 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](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/c)
- The American Liver Foundation at [www.liverfoundation.org](http://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](http://www.nj.gov/health)