What Everyone Should Know About Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a virus transmitted through blood that affects the liver. Approximately 200 million people worldwide are infected with hepatitis C, 4.5 million Americans, and over 110,000 in Massachusetts alone. For comparison, 40 million people worldwide are infected with the HIV/AIDS virus, or approximately 900,000 Americans. The majority of people who contracted hepatitis C develop chronic liver disease, which inflames the liver. Hepatitis C can be fatal if left undiagnosed and untreated. “End-stage” liver disease caused by hepatitis C is the most frequent cause for liver transplantation among adults, and contributes to the deaths of 60,000 Americans each year. If diagnosed early and treated, however, hepatitis C can be relatively benign and, in some individuals, produce virtually no symptoms.

Why should I care?

Hepatitis C is a huge and growing epidemic that has largely been ignored by governments and the public since it was identified in 1991. Treatment of hepatitis C costs range from $6 million annually for medical and work lost costs, to $4 billion for lifetime health care costs for Americans. The cost of liver transplants range from $300,000 -$500,000 for year one and the subsequent follow up year. This figure is expected to rise substantially as the slow-acting disease finally causes serious complications in many people. While the majority of individuals with hepatitis C are white and male, infections are on the rise particularly among Latinos and African-Americans. 6% of black men in America have hepatitis C, as opposed to a little more than 3% of white men. Very few educational or preventative measures have been made by the government or private foundations, and testing is costly and still not anonymous.

Appalling? Indeed. Hopeless? Certainly not. The more the public knows about hepatitis C, the more people will act out as advocates for changes in policy, prevention, education, and treatment.

What isn’t hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is not hepatitis A or B. Hepatitis A and B are two different viruses that commonly produce acute (fast and furious) liver disease, as opposed to chronic liver disease. Hepatitis A is transmitted via blood and fecal matter (poop), and hepatitis B is transmitted via blood and serous fluids, such as in tears, sweat, urine, feces, breast milk, spinal fluid, and synovial fluid, but these are in low concentrations. Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

How is hepatitis C transmitted?

Hepatitis C is transmitted through direct blood-to-blood contact. Hepatitis C is not transmitted by kissing, sneezing, sharing food or eating utensils, food preparation, hugging, casual social touching, mosquitoes, or sharing a bathroom. Known methods of transmission include:

- Sharing needles or coke straws (even once!) (read more below)
- Receiving a blood transfusion or organ transplant prior to 1992.
- Emergency medical and public safety workers (such as nurses and firefighters) exposed to needle sticks and sharp blades, or mucosal exposure to HCV-positive blood
- Long-term hemodialysis
- Receiving a clotting factor made prior to 1987
- Having a mother who is HCV-infected (≈ 5% of babies born to HCV+ mothers become infected with hepatitis C)
Other Risk Factors Include:
  » Sharing razors or toothbrushes with an HCV-infected person
  » Tattooing or body piercing with used or improperly sterilized needles
  » Touching or cleaning the vomit or open cuts of an HCV-infected individual
  » Hepatitis C is a concern among veterans of any age, including WWII veterans
  » Sexual practices that increase the likelihood of directly exchanging blood (read more below)

Hepatitis C and Drugs

The most common method of transmitting hepatitis C is by sharing needles. Approximately 85% of individuals who do intravenous (IV) drugs contract hepatitis C within one year of starting. It is therefore absolutely crucial to participate in or support harm reduction for IV drug users, including needle exchange programs. No one “deserves” hepatitis C.

If you are using or think you might sometime in the future, be smart. Never never never never share your needle with anyone else. Get new needles by participating in needle exchange programs. If you’re in a long-term, monogamous relationship without any of the above risk factors, you probably don’t need to change your sexual practices. Talk to your partner, and talk to your doctor to figure out if you need to take any precautions.

If you are no longer using, first, be proud of yourself and second, get tested. Your chances for living a healthy life with hepatitis C are greater if you take care of yourself and seek treatment. There is no reason to be ashamed; hepatitis C is a virus, not a punishment. If you’re uncomfortable speaking about your past to others who might ask how you got hepatitis C, don’t. It’s not their business. If you’re not uncomfortable, great. The stigma of drug use needs to be erased and you’ll be working towards that goal.

Hepatitis C and Sex

Sexual contact is never absolutely safe. You should always discuss hepatitis C with your partner before having any sexual contact, protected or unprotected. However, the risk of sexual transmission is very low because the virus has not been found in semen or vaginal fluids. It is only found in blood. Transmission of the virus through sexual contact has not yet been documented, but—

Risk of sexual transmission increases:
  » in the presence of other infections or sexually transmitted diseases / infections (Herpes, Genital Warts, etc.)
  » in the presence of menstrual blood, which contains races of blood containing the virus
  » with sexual practices that are likely to rupture the skin (anal sex, aggressive penetration, S&M, etc.)
  » in the presence of external or internal cuts or sores in the genital or oral areas

If you’re in a long-term, monogamous relationship without any of the above risk factors, you probably don’t need to change your sexual practices. Talk to your partner, and talk to your doctor to figure out if you need to take any precautions.

If you have multiple or frequent partners, make safer sex a habit. Communicate with your partner. Remember that you’re getting intimate with everything about this other person (or people): mind, body, emotions, bacteria, viruses—everything. So think about it. Lesbians and trannies: don’t assume you’re immune! Menstrual blood can contain hepatitis C, and herpes and genital warts (which are transmissible among any
combination of genders) can increase the possibility of transmitting hepatitis. The first step in protecting yourself is knowledge. Go to a health care provider or center that has the right information about what you need to know about safety, protection and prevention. IN particular learn about:

- The importance of Hepatitis B vaccine
- The use of male and female (Reality ®) condoms
- Special care during pregnancy

**Protect your parts, protect your toys.**

**Symptoms**

Many people live without symptoms and are unaware of having hepatitis C until they donate blood or discover it through testing for other health problems. Common symptoms of hepatitis C in its early stages include persistent flu-like symptoms like fatigue, abdominal pain, gas, frequent bloody noses, etc. More severe symptoms include jaundice (yellowing of the skin and/or eyes), extreme fluid retention in the belly and appendages (edema), severe muscular cramping, itching, mental confusion, etc. The most indicative symptom is persistent, elevated liver enzyme levels, which must be tested in the blood.

**Methods of Treatment**

Currently there is no guaranteed method to cure hepatitis C. A doctor may recommend that a patient take a drug called interferon, depending on the individual and his/her strain of hepatitis C. Interferon is usually taken for one year in combination with another drug called ribavirin. The drug combination can allow the liver to rejuvenate itself and, in 50% of cases, eliminate any trace of the virus in the blood. Some individuals have had very good results with this form of treatment. However, the long-term efficacy of interferon is unknown, the side effects can be difficult to manage, and responsiveness to the drug varies. It is also terribly expensive, costing approximately $35,000 per yearlong treatment— just for the prescription. Most insurance companies pay for a good portion of the cost, and some prisons will pay for long-term inmates to receive treatment. Access to treatment remains privileged, however, despite everyone's right to health.

Individuals also relieve symptoms and prevent further damage by consulting non-Western medical practitioners in fields such as acupuncture, herbology, macrobiology, etc. Some insurance companies will now cover certified acupuncturists. (See Resources for more information)

The **cheapest and most important part of treating hepatitis C is to take good care of yourself:**

- Alcohol can devastate the liver alone. In combination with hepatitis C, it can lead to major problems very fast. **Stop drinking alcohol** or seek help to do so.
- Stop using recreational drugs or seek help to do so
- Read the labels on all over-the-counter drugs for warnings about its effects on the liver
- Tell your dentists and doctors to give you medications and anesthesia that are easy on the liver
- Do not take herbs or vitamins without consulting a licensed herbalist
- Eat healthy meals that are moderately low in iron, protein, and fat
- Drink lots of water
- Exercise regularly
- Manage stress and make time for relaxation and humor

New treatments are being developed and many people expect to live with hepatitis C for many years, treating it simply with great attentiveness to their health. **Health begins with**
awareness. Do some research to get to know what lifestyle changes could make big differences in your life.

I don't have hepatitis C. What can I do for others?

Hepatitis C affects everyone. It affects hundreds of millions of people worldwide, and approximately 1 out of 50 people in the United States has hepatitis C. Probably someone you know. In order to prevent the transmission of hepatitis C and curb its devastating health effects, ordinary people need to take action to change policy, educate, expand treatment options, and break the stigma.

You can start by copying this zine and distributing it widely (but please don't modify the text). Research hepatitis C so you can be informed to educate others, or to be a good support for someone who does have hepatitis C. If you know someone undergoing Interferon treatment or who is suffering from symptoms, offer to help with child-care, cooking, rides, or shopping. If you are a user or know users, talk to others about the high risk of transmitting hepatitis C through sharing needles. Start a network to exchange old needles for clean ones. If you are bilingual, consider translating for immigrants important information only available in English. *Hepatitis C is a widespread epidemic. It's everyone's responsibility to deal with it.*

Resources

For immediate help, call the toll-free hotline 1-877-HELP-4-HEP.

Seek the advice of a gastroenterologist or hepatologist who is familiar with hepatitis C. Your primary care doctor or local hospital should be able to provide references. Although we do not personally endorse any physicians listed on it, one source of finding a specialist is through the nonprofit CHECKBOOK Consumer's Database at [www.checkbook.org/doctors/pageone.cfm](http://www.checkbook.org/doctors/pageone.cfm).

Look for a support group in your area. Check our website, www.loudepidemic.org, for listings in Western Massachusetts. The American Liver Foundation is one source of finding a local support group. Call 1.800.GO.Liver or visit [www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org).

Online Resources

- [www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis)
- [www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org)
- [www.hcvadvocate.org](http://www.hcvadvocate.org)
- [www.wrongdiagnosis.com](http://www.wrongdiagnosis.com)
- [www.mphaweb.org/init_hepc.html](http://www.mphaweb.org/init_hepc.html)
- [www.tapestryhealth.org/services/harmreduction.html](http://www.tapestryhealth.org/services/harmreduction.html)


Also,

- Healing *Hepatitis C with Modern Chinese Medicine*, Zhang
- *The Hep C Help Book*, Cohen, Gish, & Doner
- Hepatitis: An internet resource guide for patients. Sulkowski, & Bartlett
- *Living with Hepatitis C*, Everson & Weinberg

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• World Health Organization, 2000 www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs164/en

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