

Hepatitis C FACTSHEET

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Division of Epidemiology, Disease Surveillance and Investigation
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 442-9371 • Fax (202) 442-8060
www.doh.dc.gov

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (HCV) causes inflammation of the liver. First called non-A non-B hepatitis, Hepatitis C was discovered in the early 1970's. It wasn't until 1989, however, that the test for specific antibodies to the virus became available, thus permitting routine testing. Each year, about 28,000 Americans contract hepatitis C, which is a more frequent cause of chronic liver disease than hepatitis B. While it was believed originally that at least half the cases of acute Hepatitis C became chronic, it is now estimated that the rate may exceed 80%. Many can develop cirrhosis. ***THIS MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE AN IMPACT ON LIFE EXPECTANCY.*** Some individuals with cirrhosis may develop cancer of the liver.

Who is at risk?

People at risk include anyone who has had a blood transfusion prior to 1989, IV drug users, hemodialysis patients, those with tattoos and those with multiple sexual partners. Body piercing and cocaine snorting also are risk factors. However, an estimated 30% have no identifiable history of exposure to the virus.

How is HCV transmitted?

The virus is found in blood and body fluids. The most effective means of transmission is through exposure to contaminated blood. Sharing needles or needle works and using contaminated razors, toothbrushes, nail clips, tattooing, body piercing or acupuncture needles used by an infected person may transmit Hepatitis C. All people with HCV are potentially infectious. As many as 3.9 million people are believed to be carriers meaning they have the virus in their system and, whether they have symptoms or not, they can infect others. HCV accounts for 90% of transfusion-related cases of hepatitis, but transfusions nowadays hardly ever transmit the infection because donor blood is tested.

What are the Symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Some people experience appetite loss, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, vague stomach pain and jaundice (a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes).

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms may occur from two weeks to six months after exposure but usually within two months.

When and for how long is a person able to spread Hepatitis C?

Some people carry the virus in their bloodstream and may remain contagious for years.

What is the treatment for Hepatitis C?

Current antiviral medicines may get rid of the virus and reduce liver disease. If you have hepatitis C, check with your doctor to see if treatment can help.

Is donated blood tested for this virus?

A specific test for Hepatitis C virus has been developed. Blood banks are screening donor's blood for Hepatitis C. These tests help to increase the safety of the blood supply.

How can the spread of Hepatitis C be prevented?

People who have Hepatitis C should be aware that their blood and possibly other body fluids are potentially infective. Care should be taken to avoid blood exposure to others by not sharing toothbrushes, razors, needles, etc. In addition, infected people must not donate blood and should inform their dental or medical care providers so that proper precautions can be followed.

