

Hepatitis C Virus Fact Sheet

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver. There are other types of viral hepatitis including Hepatitis A (formerly called infectious hepatitis), Hepatitis B (formerly called serum hepatitis), Hepatitis D, and Hepatitis E. Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C are the most common forms found in the U.S.

Who is at risk for getting Hepatitis C?

People who received a blood transfusion or blood product prior to 1990 and I.V. drug users who use shared needles are at greatest risk of contracting Hepatitis C.

How is Hepatitis C transmitted?

Hepatitis C is transmitted by exposure to blood from an infected individual. Donated blood has been screened for antibodies to Hepatitis C since 1990. Transfusion now accounts for less than 5% of acute Hepatitis C infection. The risk of transmission by household contact and sexual contact has not been well defined, but the efficiency of these risk factors appears to be low. Transmission from mother to child also appears to be uncommon.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Some individuals experience appetite loss, fatigue, nausea and vomiting, vague stomach pain, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes). Most people infected with Hepatitis C do not show any symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may appear from two weeks to six months after exposure, but usually within six to nine weeks.

When is a person at risk of transmitting Hepatitis C?

People are at risk of transmitting from one or more weeks before onset of symptoms. However, since the majority of people infected with Hepatitis C do not have symptoms, the period of communicability is indeterminate. People remain contagious as long as they carry the virus.

What is the treatment of Hepatitis C?

Currently, there is no post-exposure treatment that will prevent infection, nor is there treatment for acute Hepatitis C infection. For people with chronic Hepatitis C infection, interferon alpha therapy has been beneficial in about 25% of patients. Interferon and ribavirin combination therapy is also an approved treatment. The combination therapy improves the sustained response. Both medications have significant side effects that require monitoring. Other medications and combination therapies are under study and may be approved in the future.

Is there a test for this virus?

A specific serologic screening test for the Hepatitis C carrier state has been developed. Some people may not test positive until six to nine months after illness. Tests are not yet available to distinguish from acute illness and chronic infection.

How can the spread of Hepatitis C be prevented?

People with Hepatitis C should be aware that their blood and possibly other body fluids are potentially infective. Sharing toothbrushes, razors, needles, or other objects that may become contaminated with blood should not be shared with other people. Also, they should not donate blood and should inform their dental and medical providers so that proper precautions can be followed.