

Hepatitis C & You

What is it?



Hepatitis C is a viral infection caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C can only be contracted through contact with blood infected with hepatitis C. This blood must

come in contact with your blood. Some ways this can happen is through sharing unclean equipment for tattoos, piercings, pedicures and manicures, sharing needles for injecting drugs, sharing toothbrushes or nail clippers, sexual intercourse, or receiving a blood transfusion before 1990.

Once the hepatitis C virus enters the bloodstream, it travels to the liver where it attaches to healthy cells. The virus forces your liver cells to make more copies of the virus. This attack on the liver causes "inflammation." Inflammation in the liver is called hepatitis.

There are different types of hepatitis C. These types are called genotypes. In fact, there are 11 different types or genotypes of hepatitis C. The commonest genotypes throughout the world are genotypes 1, 2 & 3. It's important to know what genotype of hepatitis C you have because it predicts how you'll respond to treatment.



Hepatitis C virus "takes over" liver cells and forces them to make more copies of the virus

Think of it like this. Hepatitis C enters liver cells where it "takes over" the cell machinery. Instead of performing normal liver functions, infected cells are re-programmed to make new copies of hepatitis C virus. Once these new copies are assembled, they cross the liver cell back into the blood. This damages the liver cells and causes inflammation. In other words, liver cells are used to help build new hepatitis C virus and are demolished in the process.

What is it going to do to me?



Your liver is a very important organ in the body. It works 24 hours a day performing hundreds of vital functions for your body.

When most people first get infected they have no symptoms at all. Other people might feel tired, lose their appetite, and their skin and eyes might turn yellow.

In some people, the immune system can fight and clear the hepatitis C virus. These people recover completely. In other people the virus cannot be cleared. In this case the virus continues to irritate the liver. This is called chronic hepatitis. Chronic hepatitis can lead to scarring of the liver. Scarring of the liver is called cirrhosis. In rare cases, hepatitis C can even lead to liver cancer.

Many people with hepatitis C have no symptoms until the liver becomes scarred (cirrhosis). Once this happens it cannot be reversed. That's why it is very important to detect and treat hepatitis C.

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LiverInfo.com is a free educational website where you can learn more about hepatitis C and treatments for the disease. Liverinfo.com has many interactive and valuable tools to help you and your family understand hepatitis C medications and their impact on your disease.

What can I do about it?



If you have hepatitis C, your family doctor should refer you to an expert in liver diseases (hepatologist/gastroenterologist/infectious disease specialist). A hepatologist is a specialist doctor who is an expert in treating liver diseases. An infectious disease specialist is an expert in treating chronic infections. These types of doctors are in the best position to help you diagnose and manage your condition.

Not everyone with hepatitis C needs treatment with medications. If hepatitis C only causes slight changes in your liver enzymes then treatment may not be necessary. However, for others, treatment is aimed at clearing the virus from the body. The type of medication and duration of therapy depends on a number of factors.

For most patients a combination of peginterferon and ribavirin is the recommended treatment. If you have genotype 1 hepatitis C, a third anti-viral medication may be added. The goal of "triple therapy" is to cure hepatitis C. This means the virus is no longer detectable in your blood 6 months after therapy is completed.

Here are some other recommendations on what you should do:

- **Learn as much as you can about this disease**
- **Let your family or others who live with you know about your hepatitis C**
- **Attend your medical appointments regularly**
- **Get your blood tests done as suggested by your doctor or nurse**
- **Learn about the medications used to treat hepatitis C**