Learning About Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver infection. It is caused by the hepatitis C virus. The virus is spread through infected blood and body fluids.

Hepatitis C is often spread when a person shares infected needles used to inject illegal drugs. It also can be spread if a person uses a needle that has infected blood on it. This could happen when getting a tattoo or piercing or when getting a shot in some developing countries where they use needles more than once when giving shots.

In rare cases, a mother with hepatitis C can spread the virus to her baby at birth, or a health care worker may accidentally be exposed to blood that is infected with hepatitis C.

Experts are not sure if you can get hepatitis C through sexual contact. If there is a risk of getting the virus through sexual contact, it is very small. The risk is higher if your sex partner has hepatitis C or if you have many sex partners.

You cannot get hepatitis C from casual contact such as hugging, kissing, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food or drinks.

What happens when you have hepatitis C?

Some people who get hepatitis C have it for a short time and then get better. This is called acute hepatitis C.

But most people get long-term, or chronic, hepatitis C. This can lead to liver damage as well as cirrhosis, liver cancer, and liver failure.
Experts recommend that certain groups of people get tested for the virus. These include people who have signs of liver disease, have ever shared needles while using illegal drugs, or have had many sex partners. Ask your doctor if testing is right for you.

You can also buy a home test called a Home Access Hepatitis C Check kit at most drugstores. If the test shows that you have been exposed to the virus in the past, be sure to talk to your doctor to find out if you have the virus now.

**What are the symptoms?**

Most people who get hepatitis C do not have symptoms at first. Symptoms may include:

- Tiredness.
- Headache.
- Sore muscles.
- Nausea.
- Pain in the upper right belly.
- Yellowing of your skin and eyes (jaundice).
- Dark urine.

**How can you prevent hepatitis C?**

There is no vaccine to prevent the disease. Anyone who has hepatitis C can spread the virus to someone else. You can take steps to make infection less likely.

- Do not share needles to inject drugs.
- Follow safety guidelines if you work in a health care setting. Wear protective gloves and clothing, and dispose of needles and other sharp objects properly.
- Make sure all instruments and supplies are sterilized if you get a tattoo, have your body pierced, or have acupuncture.

To avoid spreading hepatitis C if you have it:

- Do not share needles or other equipment, such as cotton, spoons, and water, if you use needles to inject drugs.
Learning About Hepatitis C (page 3)

- Keep cuts, scrapes, and blisters covered to prevent others from coming in contact with your blood and other body fluids. Throw out any blood-soaked items such as used bandages.
- Do not donate blood or sperm.
- Wash your hands and anything that has come in contact with your blood. Use soap and water.
- Do not share your toothbrush, razor, nail clippers, or anything else that might have your blood on it.

How is hepatitis C treated?

- If you have acute hepatitis C, your doctor will probably prescribe medicine.
- If you have chronic hepatitis C, your treatment depends on whether you have liver damage, other health problems you may have, and how much virus is in your body and what type it is.
  - If there is no liver damage, you may not need treatment.
  - If there is some damage, your doctor will probably prescribe a combination of medicines.
  - You also will need to see your doctor regularly to have blood tests to check your liver.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It’s also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

Where can you learn more?

Go to http://www.kp.org

Enter C666 in the search box to learn more about "Learning About Hepatitis C".

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