



# Living with **HEP C**

**Facts about Hepatitis C**

## **IMPORTANT**

The information in this booklet is intended for people who are newly diagnosed with Hepatitis C (called Hep C for short). It can help you learn more about Hep C so you can make the best decisions for your health and avoid passing the virus to other people.

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### What is Hep C?

Hep C is a liver infection caused by a virus. Nearly 4 million people in the United States have been infected with Hepatitis C.

The virus is spread through blood to blood contact. People who received blood transfusions before 1992 or those who share, or ever shared, needles or syringes are at increased risk.

### Progression of Hep C

There is a wide range of what happens to people with Hep C. Infection with the virus may have more serious effects for some people than for others. Some people with Hep C recover without treatment. Most people who get chronic (long-term) Hep C have some liver damage and carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Certain people may develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver failure, or liver cancer over a period of many years. Other people with chronic hepatitis C have no symptoms and feel well, but should still see their doctor regularly.

Of every 100 people infected with the virus, about:

- 15-25 clear the virus without treatment (in the first six months after getting Hep C)
- 75-85 develop a long-term infection
- 70 develop chronic liver disease
- 10-20 develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) over a period of 20 to 30 years
- 1-5 will die of liver cirrhosis, or liver cancer

## Stopping the spread of Hep C

You can avoid spreading Hep C to others by doing these things:

- If you inject street drugs, never share needles, syringes, cotton, cups, ties, water, or cookers. This can also prevent other infections from viruses or bacteria.
- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, needles, nail files, clippers, nail scissors, washcloths, or anything that may have come in contact with your blood.
- Cover all cuts and open sores with bandages.
- Throw away used bandages or menstrual pads in a plastic bag so others will not be exposed to your blood.
- Clean up any blood spills with a bleach solution (1 part regular household bleach to 10 parts water).
- Wash your hands well after touching your blood.
- Tell your doctors, dentists, and other health care providers that you are infected with Hep C.
- Use condoms and talk to your partner about Hep C. The risk of sexual transmission of hepatitis C is not fully understood, though it appears to be low. The risk may be greater for people with more than one sexual partner, people who have genital sores or lesions, and for people who engage in sexual activities (i.e., anal sex) where blood is more likely to be present.

Hep C is not spread by sneezing, coughing, kissing or hugging, or sharing eating utensils, drinking glasses, food or water. You cannot spread it by casual contact, such as shaking hands, or talking. People with Hep C should not be excluded from work, school, play, child care, or other settings.

### **Hep C and pregnancy**

About five out of every 100 infants born to women with Hep C become infected at birth. These babies seem to do very well in the first few years of life. More studies are needed to find out if these children have problems from Hep C as they grow older. There are currently no treatments to prevent the spread of Hep C from mother to baby.

### **People who are high risk**

People are at higher risk of Hepatitis C and should be tested if they:

- ever injected street drugs (even once)
- received a blood transfusion, blood products, an organ transplant or a tissue transplant before 1992
- were treated for clotting problems with a blood product before 1987
- were ever on kidney dialysis
- were ever a health care worker who had contact with hepatitis C-infected blood, especially through needle sticks
- were born to a Hep C-infected mother
- were born from 1945-1965. Baby boomers are at higher risk for having Hep C.

Lesser risks include:

- having unprotected sex with a person infected with Hep C
- sharing items with a Hep C-infected person that may contain blood, such as toothbrushes or razors

There are many blood tests that can diagnose Hep C. You usually need more than one test to find out if you have chronic Hep C.

### **Antibody tests**

If you are exposed to Hep C, your body makes Hep C antibodies. A Hep C antibody test looks for their presence in your blood. If you have Hep C antibodies it means that you have been exposed to Hep C. It does not say whether the infection is new (acute), chronic (long-term), or if you had Hep C in the past but it is no longer present. Fifteen to twenty-five people out of 100 who have been exposed to Hep C clear the infection without treatment.

If you have a positive Hep C antibody test result, it means you need to see a doctor and get more testing.

### **PCR tests/viral load test**

A PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test looks for the Hep C virus in the blood. It is sometimes also called a viral load test.

A positive PCR test means that you have Hep C. PCR can also be used to measure how much Hep C virus there is in the blood, and this can be used to measure your response to treatment.

### **Hepatitis C genotype test**

The Hep C genotype test indicates the strain of the virus and is used in making decisions about treatment.

## COMMON TESTS FOR HEP C

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### Tests to evaluate your liver

**Liver Function Tests (LFTs):** Blood tests that show how your liver is working. The most important tests are:

- Alanine Aminotransferase (ALT), also called SGPT
- Aspartate Aminotransferase (AST), also called SGOT

These 2 enzymes, if elevated, show liver damage. These are included in regular doctor visits for people with chronic Hep C.

**Alkaline phosphatase (Alk. Phos.):** An enzyme that indicates obstruction of the biliary (bile) system, either within the liver or in the larger bile channels outside the liver.

**Liver biopsy:** The removal of a small piece of tissue from the liver using a special needle. The tissue is examined under a microscope to look for liver damage.

**Ultrasound or sonogram:** A picture that shows if there are changes in the shape of the liver. This is used to find tumors in the liver.

**Alpha-fetoprotein (AFP):** Increased levels may indicate liver cancer.



### How to stay healthy if you have Hep C:

- **Do not drink alcohol.** This is very important. Alcohol can damage your liver, especially in people with Hep C. Alcohol makes the Hep C virus reproduce more, and the virus makes alcohol more damaging to the liver.
- **Eat healthy and maintain a healthy weight.** Eat at least five servings of fruits or vegetables a day.
- **Rest.** Try to get a full night's sleep every night and take naps on days you feel really tired. When your body is well rested, it will help you stay healthy.
- **Exercise.** Exercise can help you release stress, maintain a healthy weight, and get the energy you need. Get at least 30 minutes of physical activity (such as a brisk walk) at least five days a week. If you are not used to exercising, start slowly. Even a small amount of exercise can help you feel healthier. Your doctor can help you decide what's right for you. Remember, you should check with your doctor before starting any form of exercise.
- **Talk about your feelings.** Finding out that you have Hep C can be overwhelming. You may feel scared, sad, angry, confused, and upset. These feelings are normal and they can get better with time. Talking about your feelings and taking steps to take care of yourself and stay healthy can help. However, if your feelings don't get better or if they stop you from doing your daily activities, you may be having symptoms of depression. Talk to your doctor and people close to you so you can get the support and help you may need.
- **Get help.** If you have a drug or alcohol problem seek treatment, therapy or support.

## TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

- **Get the right medical care.** See a doctor who knows about Hep C. People with chronic Hep C need regular check-ups. Other things to consider with about medical care for Hep C:
  - Talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated against hepatitis A and B, separate viral infections that can damage your liver. The vaccines are safe and effective, and can help you stay healthy. (See page 12 for more information.)
  - Have your liver checked once or twice a year. Certain blood tests need to be performed to monitor your liver's health.
  - Check with your doctor before taking any medicines. Even some over-the-counter and herbal medicines can injure your liver.

If you have chronic Hep C and your liver disease progresses, here are some extra precautions you should take:

- Get vaccinated for flu every year.
- Get vaccinated for pneumonia.
- Avoid eating raw shellfish as it may carry bacteria that can cause an infection in people with liver disease.

### Treating chronic Hep C

Not everyone with chronic Hep C needs treatment. Some people stay healthy living with the virus and never need treatment.

The landscape of treatment for Hep C infection has evolved substantially since the introduction of highly effective anti-viral therapies in 2011. Numerous new drugs with different mechanisms of action have recently become available. This trend will likely continue over the next few years.

Some people may want to wait and others will need treatment right away. The best way to find out if you need treatment is to talk to a doctor who knows about Hep C, such as a gastroenterologist, hepatologist, or infectious disease specialist.

## General information

Vermont Department of Health  
802-863-7240  
[http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/hepatitis\\_c/](http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/hepatitis_c/)

Hepatitis Resource Guide  
[http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/hepatitis/documents/hepatitis\\_resource\\_guide.pdf](http://healthvermont.gov/prevent/hepatitis/documents/hepatitis_resource_guide.pdf)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)  
1-800-443-7232 or [www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis)

American Liver Foundation  
1-800-465-4837 or [www.liverfoundation.org](http://www.liverfoundation.org)

Hepatitis Foundation International  
1-800-891-0707 or [www.hepfi.org](http://www.hepfi.org)

National Institutes of Health (NIH) National Digestive Diseases  
Information Clearinghouse  
[http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hepc\\_ez/](http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/hepc_ez/)

Hepatitis C Support Information - Hepatitis C Support Project  
[www.hcvadvocate.org](http://www.hcvadvocate.org)

Veterans Affairs - National Hepatitis C Program  
[www.hepatitis.va.gov](http://www.hepatitis.va.gov)

Harm Reduction Coalition - Hepatitis C Harm Reduction Project  
[www.harmreduction.org](http://www.harmreduction.org)

Needle exchange programs in NYC  
[http://hepcproject.typepad.com/hepc\\_c\\_project/2005/09/needle\\_exchange.html](http://hepcproject.typepad.com/hepc_c_project/2005/09/needle_exchange.html)

## RESOURCES

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### **Spanish/Español:**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)  
1-888-246-2857 / 1-888-443-7232  
[www.cdc.gov/spanish/enfermedades/hepatitis/](http://www.cdc.gov/spanish/enfermedades/hepatitis/)

American Liver Foundation  
Folleto de la Hepatitis C  
[http://www.liverfoundation.org/downloads/alf\\_download\\_732.pdf](http://www.liverfoundation.org/downloads/alf_download_732.pdf)

### **Chinese:**

American Liver Foundation  
Hepatitis C brochure in Chinese  
[http://www.liverfoundation.org/downloads/alf\\_download\\_976.pdf](http://www.liverfoundation.org/downloads/alf_download_976.pdf)

### **Russian:**

American Liver Foundation  
Hepatitis C brochure in Russian  
[http://www.liverfoundation.org/downloads/alf\\_download\\_762.pdf](http://www.liverfoundation.org/downloads/alf_download_762.pdf)

### **Other languages:**

American Liver Foundation  
<http://hepc.liverfoundation.org/resources/hepatitis-c-materials/>

### **Information on drug/alcohol abuse and mental health treatment**

Vermont Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program  
<http://healthvermont.gov/adap/adap.aspx>

Mental health providers  
<http://mentalhealth.vermont.gov/DAlist>

### **Information on patient assistance programs**

The following websites may provide information on how to access available Patient Assistance Programs (PAP). These programs are offered by companies that manufacture Hep C treatments to help people with no other resources to access them.

<http://hepc.liverfoundation.org/resources/what-if-i-need-financial-assistance-to-pay-for-treatment/>

<http://www.projectinform.org/hcvresources/>

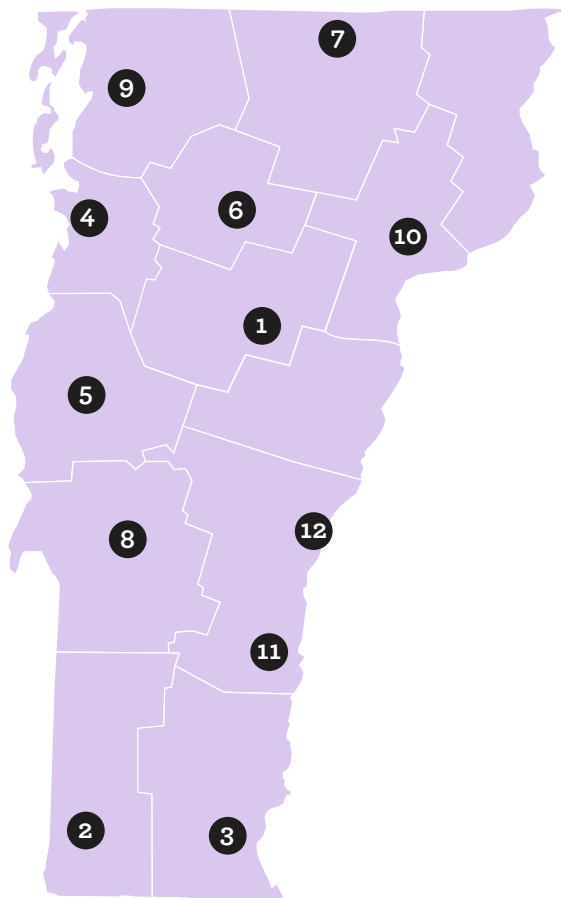
[http://www.hepmag.com/articles/hepatitis\\_paps\\_copays\\_20506.shtml](http://www.hepmag.com/articles/hepatitis_paps_copays_20506.shtml)

### Vaccination

Vaccination against Hepatitis A and B is recommended for people with Hepatitis C. The vaccines are safe, effective, and can protect your liver from further damage.

Get the vaccines from your regular health care provider, or if you don't have health insurance, you can visit one of our local Health Department offices:

- ① **Barre:** 888-253-8786 **or** 802-479-4200
- ② **Bennington:** 800-637-7347 **or** 802-447-3531
- ③ **Brattleboro:** 888-253-8805 **or** 802-257-2880
- ④ **Burlington:** 888-253-8803 **or** 802-863-7323
- ⑤ **Middlebury:** 888-253-8804 **or** 802-388-4644
- ⑥ **Morrisville:** 888-253-8798 **or** 802-888-7447
- ⑦ **Newport:** 800-952-2945 **or** 802-334-6707
- ⑧ **Rutland:** 888-253-8802 **or** 802-786-5811
- ⑨ **St. Albans:** 888-253-8801 **or** 802-524-7970
- ⑩ **St. Johnsbury:** 800-952-2936 **or** 802-748-5151
- ⑪ **Springfield:** 888-296-8151 **or** 802-885-5778
- ⑫ **White River Junction:** 888-253-8799 **or** 802-295-8820



## **Things you can do to help yourself stay healthy if you have Hep C:**

1. Do not drink alcohol.
2. Eat healthy and maintain a healthy weight.
3. Rest.
4. Exercise.
5. Get help — see a doctor who knows about Hep C.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The New York City Department of Health  
and Mental Hygiene

