

Do I Need to Be Tested?

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease that affects your liver. It is caused by a virus called the hepatitis C virus, or HCV for short. In the United States, an estimated 2.7–3.9 million persons (1.0%–1.5%) are infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection, and an estimated 17,000 persons were newly infected in 2010, the most recent year that data are available. The age group with the highest prevalence of hepatitis C are persons born during 1945–1965. Approximately one out of every 33 of these “baby boomers” has hepatitis C. Baby boomers make up the majority of all chronic HCV infections among adults in the United States. Although effective treatments are available to clear HCV infection from the body. Around half of persons with HCV do not know they are infected. HCV testing is the first step toward improving health outcomes for persons infected with HCV.

If you are not sure what your test result means or are concerned about the results, talk with your VA health care provider.

Why should I get tested for hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C infection is usually asymptomatic – meaning, people have no symptoms at all. If people do have symptoms, they are often very mild. But hepatitis C is a serious illness because over time, it can slowly and silently progress to severe liver damage and lead to cirrhosis (or scarring of the liver) and sometimes liver cancer. Finally, because it stays in your body, you can give the hepatitis C virus to someone else.

How do I decide if I should get tested for hepatitis C?

Talk with your VA doctor about being tested if any of these apply to you:

- you were born between 1945 - 1965
- you ever used a needle to inject drugs, even if it was many years ago
- you had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992
- you were a health care worker and had contact with blood on the job
- you were on long-term kidney dialysis
- your mother had hepatitis C when she gave birth to you
- In addition, the Veterans Health Administration recommends testing if:
 - you are a Vietnam-era Veteran
 - you have had exposure to blood on your skin.
 - you have had multiple sex partners
 - you have tattoos or body piercings
 - you have ever snorted cocaine
 - you have liver disease
 - you have a history of drinking a lot of alcohol
 - you have had an abnormal liver function test
 - you wish to be tested

What is the test for hepatitis C like?

The test to see if you have hepatitis C is very simple and will only take a few minutes. Your doctor will order a test on a small sample of your blood. You will have your blood drawn at the laboratory. You will find out the results in one or two weeks.

Where can I get tested?

Any Veteran can get a test for hepatitis C. Call your local VA medical center for an appointment.

If I don't have hepatitis C infection, can I get a vaccine?

No. There is no vaccine (or shot) that will keep you from getting hepatitis C. There are vaccines that can protect you from other kinds of hepatitis. Ask your doctor for more information.

How can I protect myself from hepatitis C infection?

There are lots of things you can do to protect yourself from hepatitis C infection. The most important thing is to avoid other people's blood or things that might have other people's blood on them. Here are some suggestions:

Don't inject drugs.

If you can't stop, use a clean needle every time, and never share your needle or works with anyone else. Ask your doctor how you can stop using drugs.

Practice safe sex.

Use a latex barrier, such as a condom (or rubber), every time you have sex. Talk with your sex partner(s) about hepatitis C and other sexually transmitted diseases.

If you are a health care worker, follow standard precautions.

Handle needles and other sharps safely. Report every needle stick or other injury on the job to your supervisor.

Don't share personal items that might have blood on them.

These items include razors, toothbrushes, and personal medical supplies.

Talk with your doctor about hepatitis C.

Your doctor can provide you with more information about how to protect yourself from hepatitis C infection. These suggestions may also help protect you from other diseases, such as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and HBV (hepatitis B virus). Talk with your doctor if you would like more information about these other viruses.

What are some ways hepatitis C is NOT spread?

Hepatitis C is mainly spread through blood. You cannot get hepatitis C from:

- holding someone's hand
- hugging or kissing someone
- being coughed or sneezed on
- sharing eating utensils
- sharing food
- eating dirty food
- drinking dirty water
- donating blood

Who can I contact for more information?

Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at:

<http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/>

For more information, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at:

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis>

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