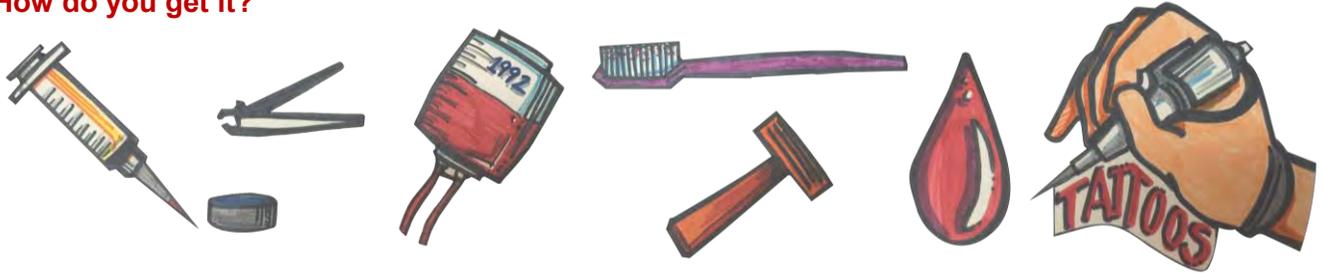


Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by many different things like being overweight, drinking too much alcohol or by taking too much of certain types of medications. Hepatitis is also caused by different kinds of viruses like hepatitis A, B and C.

Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). It is the most common infection spread by blood in the United States.

1) How do you get it?



HCV is spread or transmitted by blood-to-blood contact. In other words, someone's hepatitis C infected blood would have to get into the bloodstream of someone else. Here are some common ways people share blood:

- **Injection drug use:** Sharing equipment including needles, cookers, tourniquets or cottons that have been previously used by someone with hepatitis C
- **Tattooing or body piercing:** Using needles and equipment that have been used previously for tattooing and body piercing, including reusing the tattoo ink
- **Personal hygiene items:** Sharing personal items such as razors, nail clippers and toothbrushes with someone who has hepatitis C
- **Blood transfusion:** Receiving blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992 when testing for hepatitis C was not available
- **Childbirth:** A mother with hepatitis C and give it to her child during childbirth, although this is rare.
- **Sex:** Having sex with an infected person can spread the virus; but, this is also rare and blood (even a small amount) must be present. It is not spread through semen or vaginal fluid.
- **Lancets:** People who share lancets with someone who is infected with hepatitis C, such as people who are diabetic, are at risk of transmitting the virus.

2) How do you know you have it?

Testing: The only way to know you have hepatitis C is to get tested. There are three tests you should know about:

- **Antibody test: Have I been exposed to the virus?**
 - The first test you get is a called a hepatitis C antibody test. This test shows if you have ever been exposed to hepatitis C. If you test positive for hepatitis C antibodies, it is important to get the hepatitis C viral load (test two) to determine if the virus is still in your body. Once you test positive for the antibody, the test will remain positive even if they no longer have the virus in their blood.
- **Viral load test: Do I still have the virus?**
 - The second test is called a hepatitis C viral load or HCV RNA. This test shows if you *still have the virus*. Out of 100 people who are exposed to the virus, about 15-25 can fight the virus off on their own. But – it is important to know that if you fought off the virus on your own once, you will not always be able to fight it off again. If this test is positive 6 months after you were exposed, it is unlikely you are able to fight off the virus alone and you will need treatment to get rid of the virus.



- **Genotype test: What kind of hepatitis C do I have?**
 - If you have a positive viral load test, a genotype test is done to figure out what kind of hepatitis C you have. There are multiple types of hepatitis C and each is treated differently. This test will help your provider understand which medication to prescribe and how long you should take it.

There are other tests your provider will do in order to better understand how the virus is impacting your body. It is important that you talk to your provider to better understand what tests are ordered and what the results mean.

Symptoms: Most people do not have symptoms although hepatitis C can affect all parts of your body. If you are feeling poorly it is important to ask your provider if your symptoms are related to your hepatitis C.

3) Can it be treated or cured?



HCV is curable. If you were not able to fight the virus off on your own, you need to take medications to help your body get rid of the virus. Hepatitis C treatment is changing rapidly and the medications are becoming easier to take and are more effective. Hepatitis C is now curable in the majority of cases (> 90% cure rate) who get treated. This means that the virus will no longer cause damage to your body and you cannot give it to someone else. A provider will determine the correct medications.

4) What can happen if you don't get it treated or cured?

Complications from hepatitis C can take many years to develop. Hepatitis C may cause your liver to become scarred which is called cirrhosis. Cirrhosis of the liver can also cause damage to other parts of your body making you ill. People with hepatitis C are at an increased risk of developing liver cancer and other life-threatening complications. It is important to listen to your provider and complete all tests ordered.



Healthy



Cirrhosis

5) How can you prevent getting hepatitis C or giving hepatitis C to others?

There are many ways to prevent getting or giving hepatitis C to someone else including:

- Don't share needles or works (cookers, cotton, ties, water, etc.)
- Don't share personal items like razors, nail clippers, or toothbrushes.
- Make sure only new needles and ink are used when getting a tattoo and a new needle is used each time for body piercing. All equipment should be sterilized.
- Utilize latex condoms during sex with multiple sex partners. Talk to your provider about having your partner(s) tested.