



Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a disease caused by a virus that infects the liver. It can lead to serious health problems if not treated, but new medicines can cure most people.

How common is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C affects millions of people worldwide. In the United States, new cases have increased in recent years, mostly among people who use injection drugs. Many people with hepatitis C do not know they have it because they often feel fine for years.

How is hepatitis C spread?

The virus is mainly spread through blood-to-blood contact. The most common way is by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. It can also spread through unprotected sex (especially among men who have sex with men and have HIV), from mother to baby during pregnancy, and rarely through unsafe medical procedures or blood transfusions (which is very uncommon in the US).

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Most people do not have symptoms, so screening is important. All adults 18 years and older should be tested at least once, and pregnant women should be tested during each pregnancy. Testing starts with a blood test for hepatitis C antibodies. If positive, another test checks for the virus itself (HCV RNA). If the virus is present for more than six months, it is called chronic hepatitis C.

How is hepatitis C treated?

Hepatitis C can be cured in more than 95% of people with new medicines called direct-acting antivirals (DAAs). Treatment usually lasts 8 to 12 weeks and is taken as pills. Common medicines include sofosbuvir (Sovaldi) and combinations like glecaprevir/pibrentasvir or sofosbuvir/velpatasvir. These medicines are safe and well tolerated. Most people do not need to see a specialist; primary care doctors can prescribe treatment. Treatment may be based on the genetic type of hepatitis C (genotype) a person has contracted.

What is the outlook (prognosis)?

If treated and cured, hepatitis C does not come back unless you are re-infected. Cure reduces the risk of liver cancer, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), and other health problems. If hepatitis C is not treated, it can slowly damage the liver over many years, leading to cirrhosis, liver failure, or liver cancer.

What are the possible complications?

- Cirrhosis (severe scarring of the liver)
- Liver cancer
- Liver failure
- Other problems like fatigue, joint pain, and skin issues

How can hepatitis C be prevented?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. The best way to prevent infection is to avoid sharing needles or other drug equipment, use condoms for sex, and be sure tattoos and piercings are done in safe, regulated establishments. Pregnant women with hepatitis C should talk to their doctor about ways to lower the risk of passing the virus to their baby.

What should you do next?

If you think you might be at risk, ask your doctor about getting tested. If you have hepatitis C, treatment can cure you and protect your health. Regular check-ups are important, especially if you have liver damage.

If you have questions or new symptoms, talk to your healthcare provider.

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