

HEPATITIS C

Information About Testing



Why is it important to get tested?

Most people with Hepatitis C do not have any symptoms and do not know they are infected. As a result people could be living with Hepatitis C and appear healthy while liver damage silently occurs.

If you think you might have been exposed to the Hepatitis C, talk to your doctor about getting tested. By knowing your test results, you can get medical care, take care of your liver, and take action to avoid spreading the virus to others. If you are told you have Hepatitis C, be sure to ask if both your antibody and confirmatory tests are positive.

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis C virus. When first infected, a person can develop an “acute” infection, which can range in severity from a very mild illness with few or no symptoms to a serious condition requiring hospitalization. Acute Hepatitis C is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the Hepatitis C virus. For reasons that are not known, 15%–25% of people “clear” the virus without treatment.

For approximately 75%–85% of people who become infected with the Hepatitis C virus, the acute infection progresses to a “chronic,” or lifelong, infection. Chronic Hepatitis C is a long-term illness that occurs when the Hepatitis C virus remains in a person’s body. Over time, it can lead to serious liver problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis, liver failure, or liver cancer. Chronic Hepatitis C is one of the leading causes of liver disease and is the leading cause of liver transplantation in the United States.

How common is Hepatitis C?

It is estimated that 3.2 million people in the United States are living with Hepatitis C. Most do not know they are infected. More than 18,000 people become infected each year.

Millions of Americans have Hepatitis C, but most don’t know they are infected.

How can a person get Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is usually spread when blood from a person infected with the Hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. Most people become infected with Hepatitis C by sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs.

It is possible to have gotten Hepatitis C from injecting drugs, even if just once or many years ago. Before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992, Hepatitis C was commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants. Some people don’t know how they got infected.

Sometimes the Hepatitis C virus can be spread by having sex with an infected person, although scientists believe this does not happen very often. Having a sexually transmitted disease or HIV, sex with many partners, or rough sex appears to increase a person’s risk for Hepatitis C. There also appears to be an increased risk for getting Hepatitis C among gay men who are HIV positive.





Questions to ask when you are getting tested:

- What test or tests am I getting today?
- How long does it take to get my results?
- When and how will I learn about my results?
- Will I need additional tests?
- What else should I do?

How does a person know if she or he is infected with the Hepatitis C virus?

Two different types of blood tests are needed to tell if a person has Hepatitis C.

- **The antibody test.** A person first gets a blood test that looks for “antibodies” to the Hepatitis C virus. Antibodies are released into the bloodstream when a person becomes infected. The initial screening test is a Hepatitis C antibody test or the anti-HCV test. One of the most common names for this test is EIA (enzyme immunoassay). If the screening test is positive for Hepatitis C antibodies, it means the person is or has been infected with the Hepatitis C virus. Some people who get infected are able to fight the virus and clear it from their bodies. For most people, the virus remains and becomes a chronic infection. Once people become infected, they will always have antibodies in their blood, regardless of whether they have cleared the virus or become chronically infected.
- **The confirmatory test.** If a person has a positive antibody test for Hepatitis C, he or she must also have a confirmatory test. This test looks for the presence of the Hepatitis C virus. Unlike the antibody test, when the confirmatory test is positive, this means a person currently has the virus in his or her blood.

The test detects the genetic material in the Hepatitis C virus, called RNA. There are different ways of detecting viral RNA, but the test most commonly used is called PCR (polymerase chain reaction).

If you think you may have been exposed to the Hepatitis C virus, get tested. Early detection can save lives.

What do the results of the two tests mean?

People who have a **positive** antibody test along with a **negative** RNA test have had an infection that has been cleared. He or she is not infected now.

People who have a **positive** antibody test along with a **positive** RNA test have an ongoing Hepatitis C infection.

When a person becomes infected with Hepatitis C, it can take a few weeks or a few months until the blood tests can show the presence of antibodies and the virus. A few people can have negative test results, but still have the Hepatitis C infection. If a person might have been exposed to the virus right before the tests, it is a good idea to repeat the tests in 6 months to check if the virus is present.

For more information

Talk to your health professional, call your health department, or visit www.cdc.gov/hepatitis.



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Division of Viral Hepatitis

