

Hepatitis C: Making Sense of Your Diagnosis



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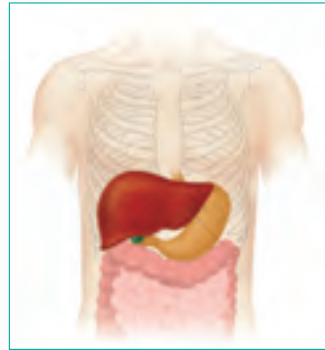
Knowing that you have hepatitis C can help you make healthier decisions.

There is treatment for hepatitis C. Many people finish treatment and get rid of the virus. There are services that can help you understand hepatitis C and, to help you stay healthy and protect others.

Over many years and without treatment, hepatitis C can cause a lot of damage to your liver and you can become very sick. Taking steps to stay healthy can help prevent liver damage.

The liver is an important organ in your body. The liver:

- Fights infections, cleans toxins from the blood and digests food; and
- Is on the right side of the body, under the ribs, and is about the size of a football.



Stages of liver damage

Without treatment, damage to the liver gets worse over time. These are the stages of liver damage:

- **Hepatitis C infection.** The hepatitis C virus enters the bloodstream, is carried to the liver and infects the liver cells;
- **Inflammation.** Infected liver cells become damaged and some cells die. This causes the liver to swell. Most people don't even know when this is happening;
- **Fibrosis.** Over time, scars may form on the liver. This is called fibrosis. How much fibrosis there

is usually depends on how long a person has been infected with hepatitis C;

- **Cirrhosis.** As fibrosis increases over many years, the liver can harden and shrink. This is an advanced form of liver disease called cirrhosis; and
- **Liver cancer or liver failure.** After a long period of time, people may get liver cancer or the liver can stop working.

But remember, there is treatment for hepatitis C. Many people finish treatment and are able to get rid of the virus. Living a healthy lifestyle can help you.

Ways to stay healthy

Here are some of the different steps you can take to stay healthy with hepatitis C:

- Take good care of your liver by eating well, exercising and resting;
- Protect yourself from other viruses. Infection with more than one virus is called co-infection and it can make liver damage from hepatitis C worse;
- Think about who to tell. You might want to tell people you can trust that you have hepatitis C so they can support you. You might also tell others, including sexual partners, so they can get tested too;
- If you have any questions or want help, talk to a nurse, doctor, counsellor or community worker;
- See a health care provider to find out about tests that can help you keep track of your hepatitis C;
- Eat healthy foods, especially food that is low in fat, sugar and salt;

- Drink plenty of water every day;
- Maintain a healthy weight and try not to become overweight;
- If you're overweight, try to lose weight;
- Ask your doctor or health care provider about taking vitamins;
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B; and
- If you can, quit smoking or smoke less. Smoking has been found to harm the liver, especially if you smoke and drink alcohol.

Help protect the people in your life

Basic ways to prevent the spread of hepatitis C include:

- Having your own personal care items that might have blood on them. This includes toothbrushes, razors and nail clippers. Don't share these items with other people;
- Using bandages to cover cuts and sores;
- Not sharing equipment for piercing or tattooing. This includes needles, ink and inkpots;
- Using your own drug equipment and not sharing it with other people; and
- Using a condom or dental dam during sex especially when there could be blood.

Remember

- Hepatitis C is spread through blood-to-blood contact when there is hepatitis C present;
- Hepatitis C is a strong virus and can live outside of the body for many days. This means that dried blood can also pass the virus;

- The use of some drugs, especially alcohol, will speed up liver damage;
- Try to take care of yourself. Rest, exercise and eat healthy food;
- Many people successfully finish hepatitis C treatment and are able to get rid of the virus;
- Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing, or shaking hands or being around someone who is sneezing or coughing;
- Hepatitis C is not found in water or food; and
- Inform yourself. There is help and support available.

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