

# HEPATITIS C

## Information on Testing & Diagnosis

### What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a serious liver disease that results from infection with the Hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C has been called a silent disease because people can get infected and not know it. Some people who get infected with Hepatitis C are able to clear, or get rid of the virus, but most people who get infected develop a chronic, or lifelong, infection. Over time, chronic Hepatitis C can cause serious health problems including liver damage, liver failure, and even liver cancer.

### How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood from a person infected with the Hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. This can happen through different ways including:

**Injection drug use.** 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 it was just once or many years ago.

**Blood transfusions and organ transplants.** Before widespread screening of the blood supply began in 1992, Hepatitis C was spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants.

**Outbreaks.** While uncommon, poor infection control has resulted in outbreaks in health care facilities and residential care facilities.

While rare, spreading Hepatitis C through sex is possible. Having a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or HIV, sex with multiple partners, or rough sex appears to increase a person's risk for Hepatitis C. Hepatitis C can also be spread when getting tattoos and body piercings in informal settings or with non-sterile instruments. Some people don't know how or when they got infected.

### Who should get tested for Hepatitis C?

- Anyone who has injected drugs, even just once or many years ago
- Anyone with certain medical conditions, such as chronic liver disease and HIV or AIDS
- Anyone who has received donated blood or organs before 1992
- Anyone born from 1945 through 1965
- Anyone with abnormal liver tests or liver disease
- Health and safety workers who have been exposed to blood on the job through a needlestick or injury with a sharp object
- Anyone on hemodialysis
- Anyone born to a mother with Hepatitis C

The only way to know if you have Hepatitis C is to get tested. Early detection can save lives.

### Why is it important to get tested for Hepatitis C?

- Millions of Americans have Hepatitis C, but most don't know it.
- About 8 in 10 people who get infected with Hepatitis C develop a chronic, or lifelong, infection.
- People with Hepatitis C often have no symptoms. Many people can live with an infection for decades without feeling sick.
- Hepatitis C is a leading cause of liver cancer and the leading cause of liver transplants.
- New treatments are available for Hepatitis C that can get rid of the virus.

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## Getting tested for Hepatitis C

Doctors use a blood test, called a Hepatitis C Antibody Test, to find out if a person has ever been infected with Hepatitis C. The Hepatitis C Antibody Test, sometimes called the Anti-HCV Test, looks for antibodies to the Hepatitis C virus. Antibodies are chemicals released into the bloodstream when someone gets infected.

## Hepatitis C Antibody Test Results

When getting tested for Hepatitis C, ask your doctor when and how you will find out your results. The test results usually take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks to come back. A new rapid test is available in some health clinics.

### Non-Reactive or Negative Hepatitis C Antibody Test

- A **non-reactive** or negative antibody test means that a person does not have Hepatitis C.
- However, if a person has been exposed to the Hepatitis C virus in the last 6 months, he or she will need to be tested again.

### Reactive or Positive Hepatitis C Antibody Test

- A **reactive** or positive antibody test means that Hepatitis C antibodies were found in the blood and a person has been infected with the Hepatitis C virus at some point in time.
- Once people have been infected, they will always have antibodies in their blood. This is true if even if they have cleared the Hepatitis C virus.
- A reactive antibody test does not necessarily mean that you have Hepatitis C. A person will need an additional, follow-up test.



## Diagnosing Hepatitis C

If the antibody test is reactive, an additional blood test is needed to determine if a person is currently infected with Hepatitis C. This test is called a RNA test. Another name used for this test is a PCR test. If the RNA test is negative, this means a person does not have Hepatitis C. If the RNA test is positive, this means a person currently has Hepatitis C and should talk to a doctor experienced in diagnosing and treating the disease.

## For more information

Talk to your doctor, call your health department, or visit [www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis).