

# HEPATITIS C & INCARCERATION

## What is hepatitis?

“Hepatitis” means inflammation or swelling of the liver. The liver is an important organ that helps the body digest food, clean blood, and fight germs. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, it does not work very well.

Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. There are three common types of viral hepatitis: Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. They are all different from each other and are spread from one person to another in different ways. Hepatitis C is the most common type of hepatitis in the United States. It is also the most common type in jails and prisons.

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a serious liver disease that is caused by the Hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C is 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. For most people who get Hepatitis C, the virus stays in their body for life. Doctors call this chronic Hepatitis C.

## Incarceration and Hepatitis C

- Hepatitis C can be a health problem for people who have been incarcerated.
- Adults in correctional facilities are at risk for Hepatitis C because many people in jails or prisons already have Hepatitis C.
- The most common way inmates get Hepatitis C is by sharing equipment used for injecting drugs, tattooing, and piercing with other people who are already infected.
- The Hepatitis C virus can be spread easily to others through blood, even in very small amounts too small to see.



There are about 2.2 million people in US jails and prisons. 1 in 3 have Hepatitis C.

## How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is most often spread when blood from a person who has Hepatitis C enters the body of someone who is not infected. Here are common ways someone can get Hepatitis C:

**Blood:** The Hepatitis C virus can be found in blood spills, droplets, and blood splatters outside the body. The virus can survive in dried blood for several days. Whenever contact is made with surfaces, equipment, or objects that have infected blood on them—even in amounts too small to see—the virus can be spread to others.

**Drugs:** Most people get the Hepatitis C virus from an infected person when sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Even tiny amounts of blood on needles and other types of drug equipment can spread Hepatitis C from one person to another.

**Tattoos/Piercing/Scarring:** The Hepatitis C virus can be spread when tattoo, body art, or piercing equipment has tiny amounts of blood on it. Many people get tattoos, piercings, or other marks while incarcerated. When they share the equipment, it is easy for people to spread the virus and become infected with Hepatitis C.

**Sex:** The Hepatitis C virus can be spread through sex, although this does not happen very often. The virus seems to be more easily spread through sex when a person also has HIV or an STD. People who have rough sex or many sex partners seem to get Hepatitis C more often.

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## Can Hepatitis C be prevented?

Yes. To prevent Hepatitis C:

- Do not use tattooing, piercing, or cutting equipment that has been used on someone else. This includes such things as sharp objects, ink, needles, or barrels that could have even tiny amounts of blood on them that are too small to see.
- Do not share needles or other equipment, including cookers, cottons, ties, or water to inject drugs.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or other personal items that may have come into contact with another person's blood.

### Why doesn't cleaning kill the Hepatitis C virus?

Bleaching, boiling, heating with a flame, or using common cleaning fluids, alcohol, or peroxide will **not** clean needles, tools, and other instruments. These methods are not strong enough to kill the Hepatitis C virus. The virus can still spread easily from one person to another.

## How can you tell if someone has Hepatitis C?

You cannot tell if someone has Hepatitis C by looking at them. Doctors use a blood test to look for "antibodies," or signs in a person's blood, that they have been infected with the Hepatitis C virus at some point in time. If this test is positive for Hepatitis C antibodies, a different blood test is needed. The second test will tell if the Hepatitis C virus is still in the body. If this test is positive, it means a person currently has Hepatitis C. Additional tests and a medical exam are needed to confirm the diagnosis.

## What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Many people with Hepatitis C have no symptoms and do not know they are infected. If a person has symptoms, they can include one or more of the following: fever, stomach pain, feeling very tired, grey-colored stool, not wanting to eat, bone or joint pain, upset stomach, throwing up, dark urine, yellow skin and eyes.

## What happens if a person has Hepatitis C?

When a person gets infected with the Hepatitis C virus, different things can happen depending on a person's age, health, and use of drugs or alcohol. Some people have health problems within a few years of getting infected. Other people live with Hepatitis C for 20 or 30 years without symptoms or feeling sick. Over time, the virus can cause serious health problems for some people.

## Can Hepatitis C be treated?

Yes, but not everyone needs medical treatment or can benefit from it. If possible, it is important for people who have Hepatitis C to get regular check-ups. A doctor will run tests to see if the virus is causing damage to the liver. If the liver is damaged, medicines called "antivirals" can sometimes help. These medicines can slow damage to the liver, and may even get rid of the virus.

## What can people infected with Hepatitis C do to take care of their liver?

People with Hepatitis C should not use alcohol or street drugs, as these can hurt the liver. Some other products can also hurt people with Hepatitis C, even if they appear to be safe. Check with medical staff before taking any kind of pill, vitamin, herbal product, or medicine.

## For more information

Talk to medical staff or your doctor, or have your loved ones talk to a doctor, clinic, or health department. Information on Hepatitis C can be found at: [www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis).