

Spotlight on Health

Hepatitis C Virus

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection has been called a silent epidemic. That's because most infected people don't look or feel sick for many years. In fact, most of them don't even know they're infected. But HCV infection can lead to serious health problems. In this newsletter, we'll review what HCV is and look at 2 groups of people who are at increased risk of being infected. We'll find out why HCV screening is so important. And we'll review new treatments that give people with HCV an excellent chance of being cured.

What Is HCV?

HCV is a virus that causes liver disease. About 15% to 25% of the time, the virus will go away on its own.¹ The other 75% to 85% of the time, the infection becomes chronic.¹ That means it can last a lifetime if not treated. It can slowly damage your liver even if you have no symptoms.

Chronic HCV can cause:

- Liver damage
- Liver failure
- Liver cancer
- Need for a liver transplant

If left untreated, chronic HCV infection can cause death.

Who Is at Increased Risk for HCV?

Several groups of people are at increased risk of having HCV. These 2 are of particular concern:

Baby Boomers

Baby boomers are 5 times more likely to have HCV.² These are people who were born between 1945 and 1965. Most of the ones infected may not even know they have it. Of those who don't know they have it, about 35% already have advanced liver disease.³ Baby boomers account for about 75% of deaths caused by HCV each year.³ As they age, the problem could get worse. Cases of liver disease and deaths could rise rapidly. So the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that all baby boomers to be tested once for HCV. They believe that doing so could save many lives.

Young Injection Drug Users

There has been a major increase in HCV infection among injection drug users (IDU) who are ≤ 30 years old.⁴ About one-third of them are infected.⁵ In addition to being young, most of them are white and from nonurban areas.



How Is HCV Spread?

HCV is usually spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of someone who is not infected. This can happen when:

- People share needles or other equipment while injecting drugs
- A healthcare worker is accidentally stuck by a contaminated needle
- A baby is born to a mother who has HCV

Less often, HCV can be spread by:

- Sharing personal care items like razors or toothbrushes
- Sexual contact with an infected person, especially in men who have sex with men

HCV is not spread by:

- Sharing food, drink, or eating utensils
- Breastfeeding
- Hugging, kissing, or holding hands
- Coughing or sneezing

Why Is Screening Important?

Screening can detect HCV in people who have no symptoms. There are several reasons why this is so important. People with HCV can still pass the virus to others even if they don't look or feel sick. So once people know they have the virus, they can take steps to keep that from happening. They also might be able to get treatment before they develop serious liver disease. This is especially important now that there are new therapies that can cure HCV.

What's New With HCV Treatment?

Over the last 5 years, new drugs have been developed for treating HCV. These drugs are called direct-acting antiviral agents (DAAs). They can cure >90% of people, usually in 12 weeks.⁶ In contrast, the older drugs only worked 40% to 45% of the time even though therapy lasted 6 to 12 months.⁶ DAAs also have fewer side effects than the older drugs.

How Can the Laboratory Help?

Several different blood tests are used to test for HCV. A screening test can tell whether you have ever been infected with HCV. It's a simple blood test that shows whether you have antibodies to HCV. Antibodies are part of your body's immune response to an infection. They can be measured in your blood.

But the screening test can't tell whether you are still infected. So if the antibody test is positive, you need a follow-up blood test called an HCV RNA test. This test can tell whether you have an active infection. If the test is positive, you have HCV. In this case, your doctor will probably order more tests. They can help your doctor decide which treatment is best for you. And after you start treatment, blood tests can give your doctor information about how the treatment is working. You can learn more about HCV testing [here](#).

What Can You Do?

You can encourage family and friends who are baby boomers to get screened for HCV. If you are a baby boomer, you can:

- Ask your doctor about getting screened for HCV
- Make sure you get any follow-up tests your doctor orders

There are also things you can do if you have HCV:

- Avoid drinking alcohol. Drinking alcohol makes the liver work harder and adds to the liver damage caused by HCV.
- Before taking any drugs, ask your doctor if they could harm your liver. Some drugs can cause liver damage. It doesn't matter if a doctor prescribed it for you or you bought it over the counter.
- Ask your doctor if you should get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B. These 2 types of hepatitis can also damage your liver. A vaccine could help keep you from getting them.

References

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hepatitis C information. cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/cfaq.htm. Updated January 8, 2016. Accessed March 18, 2016.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Viral hepatitis—CDC recommendations for specific populations and settings. cdc.gov/hepatitis/populations/1945-1965.htm. Updated May 31, 2015. Accessed March 15, 2016.
3. National Viral Hepatitis Roundtable. The urgency of hepatitis C screening for baby boomers. nvhr.org/sites/default/files/users/u27/NVHR%20Urgency%20Fact%20Sheet_One%20Pager%20Final.pdf. Accessed March 15, 2016.
4. Zibbell JE. Increases in hepatitis C virus infection related to injection drug use among persons aged ≤30 years—Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia, 2006–2012. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/wk/mm6417.pdf. Published May 8, 2015. Accessed March 15, 2016.
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Hepatitis C FAQs for health professionals. cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/hcvfaq.htm. Updated March 11, 2016. Accessed March 15, 2016.
6. Lam BP, Jeffers T, Younoszai Z, Fazel Y, Younossi ZM. The changing landscape of hepatitis C virus therapy: focus on interferon-free treatment. *Therap Adv Gastroenterol*. 2015;8:298-312.