

# I'M HEPATITIS C Positive, Now What?

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Hepatitis C can lead to lifelong (chronic) infection and can cause serious liver damage including cirrhosis and liver cancer.

## What Does Having Hepatitis C Mean for My Health?

For some people, hepatitis C is a short-term illness, but for most people it becomes a long-term, chronic infection. If you have acute hepatitis C, you may successfully clear the virus from your system.

Individuals who are unable to clear HCV develop chronic infection. Chronic hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems.

Most persons with chronic HCV infection are asymptomatic. However, over time many develop chronic liver disease which can range from mild to severe, including cirrhosis and liver cancer. Chronic HCV infection is the leading indication for liver transplants in the United States. A small percentage of persons with chronic HCV infection develop medical conditions due to hepatitis C that are not limited to the liver. For example, diabetes mellitus occurs three times more frequently in HCV-infected persons. HCV-positive persons should avoid alcohol because it can accelerate cirrhosis and end-stage liver disease. Patients should also check with their health care provider before taking any new prescription pills, over-the-counter drugs (such as non-aspirin pain relievers) or supplements, as these can potentially damage the liver.

## What Are the First Steps I Should Take to Manage My Infection?

If you are positive for HCV, you should visit with your doctor or health care provider to discuss treatment, as well as additional testing you may need. Educating yourself on how hepatitis C is transmitted and factors that may affect the progression of disease is also very important when you are first diagnosed.

## How Do I Find a Doctor?

In North Dakota, most individuals infected with HCV are treated by specialists such as infectious disease physicians, gastroenterologists or hepatologists (liver specialists). If you need assistance finding a healthcare provider in your area, please contact your primary care provider or call the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) at 701.328.2378.

## Is There a Cure for Hepatitis C?

Yes. There are several medications available to treat hepatitis C, including new treatments that appear to be more effective and have fewer side effects than previous options.

## How is Hepatitis C Treated?

Acute infection can clear on its own without treatment in about 25 percent of people. If acute hepatitis C is diagnosed, treatment does reduce the risk that it will become a chronic infection. There are several medications available to treat chronic hepatitis C, including new treatments that appear to be more effective and have fewer side effects than previous options. If treatment is successful, the virus will be undetectable in the patient's blood. Treatment duration may be 8 to 48 weeks depending on prior treatment history, liver damage and response to treatment. If not on treatment, individuals should avoid alcohol because it can cause additional liver damage. They also should check with a health professional before taking any prescription pills, supplements or over-the-counter medications, as these can potentially damage the liver.

## What Happens If I Don't Get Treated?

Chronic hepatitis C is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer or even death. It is the leading cause of cirrhosis and liver cancer and the most common reason for liver transplantation in the United States. Approximately 19,000 people die every year from hepatitis C-related liver disease.

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## How Can I Protect Myself and Others?

If you are infected, you can pass the virus on to others even if you don't have any symptoms. It is important to take certain precautions to prevent this from happening. Hepatitis C is spread primarily through percutaneous exposures to infectious blood such as sharing needles or other drug equipment. Although the risk is low, it is possible to spread HCV to partners through sexual contact. Hepatitis C can also be spread when getting tattoos and body piercings in unlicensed facilities, informal settings or with non-sterile instruments. To protect others, you should never share items that have come into contact with your blood such as needles, other drug equipment and personal items that might have blood on them such as toothbrushes or razors. You should cover open cuts and sores on the skin to keep from spreading infectious blood or secretions. You also cannot donate blood, organs, tissue or semen. Remember, HCV is not spread by sneezing, hugging, holding hands, coughing, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or through food or water. Any blood spills, including dried blood, should be cleaned using a dilution of one part household bleach to 10 parts of water for disinfecting the area. Gloves should be used when cleaning up any blood spills.

## I'm Pregnant. How Does Hepatitis C Affect My Baby?

Hepatitis C is rarely passed from a pregnant woman to her baby. About six of every 100 infants born to mothers with hepatitis C become infected with the virus. There is no medication or treatment that can be provided to the mother in order to prevent perinatal transmission.

## I Have Been Cured from Hepatitis C. Does This Mean I Am Immune to Hepatitis C?

No. Reinfection after cure is possible. In addition, superinfection (infection with more than one strain of HCV) is possible if risk behaviors (e.g., injection drug use) for HCV infection continue.

## Do I Need to be Excluded from Work, Child Care, School or Other Activities?

No. Children should not be excluded unless otherwise recommended by the NDDoH? and/or a health-care professional. There are no exclusion criteria for employees with hepatitis C. Employees should always practice standard precautions if a blood exposure were to occur.

## Who Do I Need to Tell About My Infection?

You should tell any person who has been exposed to your blood, including needle-sharing partners. Testing is recommended for people who have been exposed to blood from a person who has hepatitis C. You also should notify your sexual partners; however, the sexual transmission risk is very low. Other individuals such as employers do not need to know of your infection.

## How Do I Tell Others?

Talking about having hepatitis C can be difficult. If you are thinking about disclosing your hepatitis C status, know how hepatitis C is transmitted. Many individuals do not know how they can acquire hepatitis C and incorrectly think that they can get HCV from you by casual contact such as shaking hands or hugging. Often times people will have questions such as "How did you get it?" If you are uncomfortable with telling others how you acquired hepatitis C, then don't. Remember if you tell one person, be prepared for others to know. Being brief (but truthful) and being prepared to answer questions may make it easier to tell someone about your diagnosis. Another way to tell others is to notify anyone who may have been exposed to your blood and suggest testing because you care about his or her health.

## Additional Information

- [www.ndhealth.gov/disease/hepatitis](http://www.ndhealth.gov/disease/hepatitis)
- [www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis)
- <http://hcvadvocate.org/>