

NATAP Hepatitis C (HCV) Fact Sheet

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C virus or HCV is a virus that causes inflammation of the liver. It can cause liver cell damage leading to cirrhosis and cancer.

How is it spread?

Contact with blood infected with the virus, including:

- IV drug use (sharing of needles and all works)
- Razor
- perinatal transmission
- Sexual transmission is a small risk but must be addressed.

Hepatitis C is NOT spread by

- Holding hands
- Kissing
- Hugging
- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Sharing food, eating utensils or drinking glasses.

What are the symptoms?

Usually there are no symptoms. But sometimes you can experience “flu-like” feelings, severe fatigue, and emotional distress. In advanced stages of the disease there are symptoms that can include jaundice, nausea, vomiting, brain dysfunction.

Is there a treatment for HCV?

Interferon, Pegylated interferon (long acting and new) and Ribavirin. THERE IS NO VACCINE FOR HEPATITIS C – but HCV positive persons should have the Hepatitis A&B vaccines. In general, pegylated interferon plus ribavirin combination therapy is the standard of care. Pegylated interferon is a once a week subcutaneous injection. Ribavirin is taken by pills daily.

Who is at risk?

**ANYONE WHO IS HIV+ SHOULD BE TESTED FOR HEPATITIS C.
HAVING HIV CAN PROGRESS HCV MORE QUICKLY.**

- People who received blood products (blood or platelet transfusion) before 1992
- Healthcare workers
- IVDUs
- Hemophiliacs
- Infants born to infected mothers
- Persons with multiple sex partners
- Those who engage in high-risk sexual practices
- If you have sex with someone who is in a risk group for having HCV

How does Hepatitis C affect the liver?

HCV attacks the liver cell. Over time it causes scarring and fibrosis to the liver disabling it from doing its job. This can take 10-30 years when a person has HCV mono-infection. When a person has co-infection (HCV + HIV) HCV can progress 2 times faster.

What does the liver do and why is it important?

The liver's function is to process everything we eat, breathe and absorb. It converts food into nutrients and is a storehouse for vitamins and minerals. It detoxifies substances that are harmful to the body.

Diagnosis

Hepatitis C is diagnosed through several different tests.

1. Liver Function Tests: ALT (alanine aminotransferase) and AST (aspartate aminotransferase). These are enzymes within the liver that are released into the blood when the liver is damaged. Elevated ALT or AST levels alert your doctor that something is wrong with the liver. However some HCV-positive patients do not have elevated levels. You can have normal liver enzyme tests and have advanced HCV.
2. HCV Antibody tests: Elisa II and Riba (used to confirm Elisa II).
3. Viral Load Testing – used to measure the amount of HCV per milliliter of blood.
4. Genotype Testing – used to determine what kind of HCV you have. It is important to know which genotype you have (1,2,3,4) because each one responds differently to treatment. Genotype 1a and 1b are the most prevalent in the United States and are less responsive to current treatment.
5. Liver Biopsy – The liver biopsy is a medical procedure where your doctor will remove a very small piece (a sample) of your liver. It is not usually painful, but you will need to rest for a week or two. The biopsy will help the doctor determine the extent of the damage to your liver.

Individuals who have two or more infections are called co-infected. If you are co-infected with HIV and Hepatitis C virus you should try to see a hepatitis specialist and an hiv specialist.

Ask your doctor about testing, treatment and prevention!