



# Hepatitis C



**Hepatitis C** infection rates have been on the rise across the nation, but especially among Native people. Opioid use has led to an increase in the number of people who inject drugs which in turn increases the risk of blood-borne infections through the use of shared equipment<sup>1</sup>. From 2010 to 2017, acute hepatitis C infection rates nearly tripled with the largest increase being in young adults aged 20 to 39 years who inject drugs<sup>2</sup>. While hepatitis C is a serious infection, treatment is available. Getting tested for hepatitis C is a great way to take care of your liver!


## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C, is a virus that infects the liver. Without treatment, long-term hepatitis C can cause serious health problems such as liver cancer. Treatment is very effective and cures most cases of hepatitis C, but many people with hepatitis C don't know they have it. It's important to get tested if you think you might be at risk<sup>3</sup>.

## How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when the blood of an infected person enters the bloodstream of someone who is not infected. Hepatitis C is most commonly spread through injection drug use when people share syringes or other supplies with someone who is infected with the virus.

There are some less-common ways hepatitis C can be transmitted, including:


- ▶ From an infected mother to child during childbirth
  - ▶ Receiving a piercing or tattoo with unsterile equipment
  - ▶ Having unprotected sex with someone who is infected with hepatitis C
  - ▶ Sharing household items with someone who is infected with hepatitis C (toothbrushes, razors, or other items that may be exposed to blood)
  - ▶ Having received blood products or an organ transplant before 1991
  - ▶ Accidental needle sticks or other exposures to health care providers
  - ▶ Sharing equipment used to snort or smoke drugs
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## Who is at risk?

Some people are at higher risk of contracting hepatitis C, and may need to be tested for hepatitis C more often. Talk to your doctor if you:

- ▶ Injection drug users, persons having invasive medical procedures including injections and hemodialysis, persons engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors, sharing personal items with someone infected with hepatitis C (e.g., razors, toothbrushes), unregulated tattooing, needlestick injuries among health care personnel, and birth to a mother infected with hepatitis C<sup>4</sup>

*Hepatitis C is not spread through breastfeeding, sharing eating utensils, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing, sneezing, or ingesting contaminated food or water.*



## What are the symptoms?

You might feel sick when you first get infected, but if your infection turns into chronic (long-term) hepatitis C, you may not have any symptoms for many years. It is important to get tested for hepatitis C if you are at risk for the virus, even if you have no symptoms. Screening tests are available for adults age 18 and older. Talk to your doctor to learn more.

## Protect

### How can I protect myself and my relatives?

Unlike hepatitis B, there is no vaccine to protect against hepatitis C. Protect yourself and your relatives from hepatitis C by:

- ▶ Not sharing needles, syringes, or drug preparation equipment used to snort or smoke drugs
- ▶ Practicing safer sex, including condom use
- ▶ Only getting tattoos and piercings from someone licensed
- ▶ Not sharing personal care items like razors, toothbrushes, and nail clippers

### Testing Guidelines

- ▶ Hepatitis C screening at least once in a lifetime for all adults aged 18 years and older
- ▶ Hepatitis C screening for all pregnant women during each pregnancy
- ▶ Routine periodic testing for persons with ongoing risk factors, including persons who inject drugs and share needles, syringes, or other drug preparation equipment, while risk factors persist

## Treat

Treatment is recommended for people with chronic hepatitis C and cures over 90% of people. While treatment options are tailored to each person, it usually involves 8-12 weeks of pills. Hepatitis C reinfection can occur after successful treatment, however, and it is important to be aware of hepatitis C risks to prevent re-exposure. Talk to your doctor to learn more about which treatment options are best for you.

## Final Note

While hepatitis C is a serious illness, treatment is often successful and is generally covered by insurance. The earlier you get tested, the less time the virus will have had to damage the liver. Early treatment can extend your life. Join us in promoting liver health screening through hepatitis C testing in Native communities! Talk to your health care provider today about other hepatitis screening and vaccination options.



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2. "Liver Cancer Incidence in the American Indian and Alaska Native Population, United States--2012-2016." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Cancer Statistics. 9 October 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/cancer/uscs/about/data-briefs/no13-liver-cancer-incidence-AIAN-PRCDA-2012-2016.htm>.
3. "What Is Hepatitis C - FAQ." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 28 July 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/cfaq.htm#overview>.
4. "CDC Recommendations for Hepatitis C Screening among Adults - United States, 2020." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 9 Apr. 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/rr/rr6902a1.htm#References>.