Hep C 101

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is the most common blood-borne virus in the United States.

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Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by a virus. Over time, it can lead to serious complications, including cirrhosis, liver cancer and the need for a liver transplant. The good news is that medications can now cure almost everyone with hep C in eight or 12 weeks with few side effects.

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is the most common blood-borne virus in the United States. About 2.4 million people are living long term with hep C, and nearly 45,000 people acquire HCV each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Hep C is most common among baby boomers (people born between 1945 and 1965), but rates are rising among younger people in connection with the opioid epidemic. Experts now recommend that all adults should be tested for HCV at least once and more often if they are at risk. See [Latinos and Hepatitis C] to learn more about hep C in this population.

HCV is spread through contact with blood. The most common route of transmission is sharing needles and other equipment for injecting drugs. The virus may also be spread by shared tattooing and piercing tools, toothbrushes, razors and other items that come in contact with blood. HCV can be passed from mother to child during pregnancy or delivery. Sexual transmission of the virus is uncommon, but it occurs more often among gay and bisexual men. Hep C is not spread through casual contact, such as kissing or sharing eating utensils. See [Risk Factor and Testing] for more information.

There is currently no vaccine for HCV, but research is underway. Unlike some diseases, having hep C once does not provide immunity, and you can catch it again. People who clear the virus naturally or with treatment should therefore take steps to prevent reinfection.

It’s normal to feel stress, depression, anger, confusion or stigma around having hepatitis C. You may worry about passing the virus on to others or feel fearful about serious illness or death. But the CDC says people should not be excluded from work, school, play, childcare or other activities because they have hep C. Getting tested for HCV, starting treatment if you test positive and connecting with other people living with or cured of hep C can help put your mind at ease!

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