



Hepatitis C

What Is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis is a general term that means inflammation of the liver. The Ancient Greek word hepa refers to the liver, and itis means inflammation (as in appendicitis, arthritis, and pancreatitis).

Inflammation of the liver—hepatitis—has various possible causes, including:

- Toxins and chemicals such as excessive amounts of alcohol
- Autoimmune diseases that cause the immune system to attack healthy tissues in the body
- Fat which may cause [fatty liver disease](#)
- Microorganisms, including viruses

Hepatitis C is a potentially contagious, but curable disease caused by a virus that infects the liver. The bloodborne virus, called hepatitis C virus (HCV), can cause lifelong infection, fibrosis (mild to moderate liver scarring), cirrhosis (serious liver scarring), liver cancer, liver failure, and death.

There are two phases of hepatitis C infection—acute and chronic. Acute refers to a new HCV infection that is less than six months old. An HCV infection that lasts more than six months is chronic.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) estimates that approximately 3.5 million people in the United States are chronically infected with hepatitis C. The number of new cases of HCV are steadily increasing, largely due to the opioid epidemic. The CDC estimates that there were 41,200 new hep C cases in 2016.

Chronic HCV infection accounted for more than 18,000 deaths in 2016 in the United States. Beginning in 2013, the number of deaths related to hepatitis C exceeded the total number of deaths from all 60 other infectious diseases combined. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 71 million people are living with chronic hepatitis C infection. Worldwide, nearly 400,000 people will die as a result of hepatitis C.

Last Reviewed: January 10, 2019