Hepatitis C: Q&A With an Expert

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What exactly is it, and why should you care about hepatitis C? Corinna Dan, the Viral Hepatitis Policy Advisor at the HHS Office of HIV/AIDS and Infectious Disease Policy, is here to explain. Read Corinna's interview to learn how you can get hepatitis C and whether some women are at higher risk.

What is viral hepatitis?

Viral hepatitis is a group of viruses that affect the liver. In the United States, hepatitis A, B, and C are the most common types of viral hepatitis. These viruses can cause mild to severe illness, with the most severe being liver failure and death.

What makes hepatitis C unique?

Hepatitis C is unique for two reasons: It is the most common type of viral hepatitis in the United States, and it is one of the only curable chronic or long-lasting viral infections.

What's the difference between an acute and chronic infection?

An acute infection is short-term, meaning the infection lasts less than 6 months. Hepatitis C always starts as an acute infection, but 75 to 85% of acute infections become chronic, meaning that the infection can last a lifetime. If hepatitis C is left untreated, it can cause serious health problems. Problems include liver damage, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and even death. The good news is that new treatments can cure most people with hepatitis C.

How do you get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is usually spread through exposure to the blood of someone who has the infection. Today, the most common way to get hepatitis C is through sharing needles or other equipment used to inject drugs.

Before 1992, many people who received blood transfusions got hepatitis C, but that's rare now because donated blood is tested for hepatitis. Though less common, hepatitis C can also be spread during unprotected sex and from a mother to her baby at the time of birth. There is no evidence that breastfeeding spreads hepatitis C.

Are some women more at risk for hepatitis C than others?

Yes. Two groups of women have the highest risk for hepatitis C. Baby boomers, women born between 1945 and 1965, have the highest rate of chronic infection. Millennial women, women born between approximately 1980 and 2000, have the highest rate of new infection. Baby boomers were often exposed to hepatitis C during blood transfusions or medical procedures before current safety standards were established. Millennials appear to have increased exposure to hepatitis C due to injection drug use.

How often do women need to get tested for hepatitis C?

That depends. Most baby boomers only need to get tested once for hepatitis C. But all women who have an ongoing risk, such as continued injection drug use, should be tested for hepatitis C as soon as possible, and then every 6 to 12 months to ensure that they get care and treatment if they become infected.

How is hepatitis C treated?

New hepatitis C treatments cure more than 90% of people. These oral pills specifically target the virus and are called direct-acting agents (DAAs). DAAs consist of one or more pills taken every day for 8 to 12 weeks and have few side effects.

What do you want women to know about hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is curable, but too few people know that they have it. It's worth getting tested because you can avoid future severe illness and prevent transmission to others. You can take the CDC's risk assessment, learn your risks, and ask your doctor about getting tested or find a health center or testing location near you.

What's your advice for women living with a chronic infection?

With the new hepatitis C treatments, almost all people with chronic hepatitis C are recommended to be treated and cured! Ask your doctor for the treatment. Many doctors don't know about the new treatments, so don't take "no" for a final answer. More providers are treating more patients for hepatitis C, and more insurers are covering the treatments, so even if you have asked before, don't be afraid to ask again!

What is #hepC and what do women need to know about the virus? Learn more from @Hepatitis411 @HHS_ViralHep: https://go.usa.gov/xUwCV

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