

# PROTECT YOURSELF

The transmission of HCV by tattooing practices has not been well-documented, but there is a very real possibility that a person could become infected this way if precautions are not followed carefully. Because it is harder to obtain sterile tattooing tools in prisons or on the streets, getting a tattoo in these settings carries a much greater risk of transmitting HCV. We recommend only commercial tattoo parlors that practice the following precautions:

- ✓ Use only new needles.
- ✓ Use separate tattoo ink pots for each person.
- ✓ Sterilize any equipment that may come into contact with blood.
- ✓ Use new latex gloves for each person.
- ✓ Clean and disinfect surfaces.
- ✓ Cover fresh tattoos with a dressing to prevent infection or HCV transmission.
- ✓ Properly dispose of all equipment that may have come into contact with blood; use a "sharps" bin or a puncture-proof container.



## Check it Out

Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver. It is caused by a virus called the hepatitis C virus, or HCV. The U.S. government estimates that about four million Americans are infected with hepatitis C. The virus is spread by blood-to-blood contact, for example by sharing needles or tools used for tattooing.

Many people with hepatitis C have no symptoms and lead normal lives. In some people, hepatitis C can cause serious liver damage, but this often takes years or even decades. In the most serious cases, hepatitis C can cause liver failure and death. It is the most common reason for liver transplants.

Your liver is your largest internal organ, and is responsible for many vital body functions. It processes the foods you eat, filters out drugs and poisons, and stores vitamins, minerals, and sugars for later use. Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. There are other viruses that cause different types of hepatitis. Hepatitis A is the most common type of viral hepatitis. People usually get this type of hepatitis through contact with contaminated food or water. There is no treatment for hepatitis A, but the body usually controls the virus, and it does not cause chronic infection. Hepatitis B and hepatitis C are spread in similar ways. Like hepatitis C, hepatitis B can lead to chronic disease and liver damage. Both hepatitis A and hepatitis B can be prevented with vaccines. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

Treatments are available that can help slow or stop the progression of hepatitis C and reduce the risk of liver damage. Besides treatment, there are other things you can do – like eating a healthy diet and avoiding alcohol and drugs – to improve the health of your liver.

*prison or street tattoos carry a much greater risk of transmitting HCV*



## More Safety

- Never share injection drug equipment, tools used for tattooing or body piercing, or personal items such as razors or toothbrushes that may come into contact with blood.
- We do not know if bleach will kill HCV, but if you can't get new tools, cleaning shared tools with bleach may help to reduce the chance of transmitting HCV.
- Even though sexual transmission is uncommon, you can reduce your risk of getting hepatitis C by using latex condoms. If you are a woman with HCV, talk to your doctor if you are thinking about becoming pregnant.
- Cover any open cuts or sores to prevent other people from coming into contact with your blood.

## TATTOO YOU

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This information is provided by the Hepatitis C Support Project, a non-profit organization providing HCV, HBV and HIV/HCV coinfection education, support and advocacy.

Visit our websites to learn more about viral hepatitis:

[www.hcvadvocate.org](http://www.hcvadvocate.org) • [www.hbvadvocate.org](http://www.hbvadvocate.org)  
[www.hepatitistattoos.org](http://www.hepatitistattoos.org)

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HEPATITIS C SUPPORT PROJECT

TATTOO YOU

## WHAT'S RISKY?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne disease. This means it is spread through contact with blood. A person can get hepatitis C by sharing used needles to inject drugs. This happens when a small amount of infected blood stays in the needle after it is used by one person, and is injected into the bloodstream of the next person who uses the needle. The hepatitis C virus can also be spread by small amounts of blood in cookers, cottons, and other equipment used to inject drugs. Other tools that come into contact with blood can also spread the hepatitis C virus. These include tools for tattooing and body piercing, and personal items like razors and toothbrushes. Equipment used for non-injection drugs, such as crack pipes and cocaine straws, can also spread hepatitis C. Sometimes doctors and nurses get hepatitis C when they accidentally stick themselves with needles with infected blood. Before 1992, many people got hepatitis C through blood transfusions. Today donated blood is tested and transfusions are safe.

Hepatitis C may also be spread through sexual activity, but this is uncommon. Mothers with hepatitis C can pass the virus on to their babies before or during birth, but this is also uncommon. Hepatitis C is not spread through casual contact such as sneezing, coughing, hugging, or sharing drinking glasses. For about 1 in 10 people with hepatitis C, doctors cannot determine how they became infected.

## What Happens?

After the hepatitis C virus enters the body, it begins to multiply. The earliest stage of hepatitis C is called acute. This stage usually lasts up to 6 months. Most people with acute hepatitis C do not have symptoms. Others have a flu-like illness with nausea, fatigue (extreme tiredness), loss of appetite, and pain in the abdomen. Some people may get jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes) or have dark colored urine.

In some people, the body's immune system can fight off the virus. But in about 80% of people infected with hepatitis C—or about 8 out of 10—the body cannot completely get rid of the virus. In these cases, the virus stays in the body, a condition called chronic hepatitis C.

Most people with chronic hepatitis C do not have symptoms and lead normal lives. But some people do experience symptoms. The most common are flu-like illness, fatigue, fever, headaches, loss of appetite, nausea, pain in the abdomen, or pain in the muscles or joints.

About 10-20% of people with chronic hepatitis C virus—or about 1 or 2 out of every 10—will develop more serious liver damage. This process usually takes at least 10 years, and may take as long as 40 years. These people may develop scarring of the liver, called cirrhosis. There are two stages of liver cirrhosis. In people with compensated cirrhosis, the liver is damaged but can still function. In people with decompensated cirrhosis, the liver does not function properly, leading to complications such as internal bleeding and brain damage.

Some people with HCV develop liver cancer. In severe cases, liver failure can occur, and a person may need a liver transplant. Hepatitis C is the most common reason for liver transplants in the U.S.

## Staying Healthy

In addition to medical treatments, there are other things you can do to help manage hepatitis C and improve the health of your liver. Many factors such as alcohol, drugs, chemicals, smoking, and emotional stress can be harmful to the liver. Good nutrition is important to keep the liver functioning properly. A well-balanced diet that is low in fat, salt and sugar is important. Information about a healthy diet can be found at the USDA's website [www.myplate.gov](http://www.myplate.gov). Before taking any vitamins or supplements check with your medical provider—high doses of certain vitamin supplements can harm the liver and should be avoided. Moderate exercise can help to control stress and fatigue. But avoid exercise if you are feeling very ill.

## Work It!

Today, the current standard treatment for hepatitis C (HCV or Hep C for short) is a combination of two or three medications depending on the strain (genotype) you have. The most common genotypes are genotype 1, 2, and 3. The combination of 2 or 3 medications to treat hepatitis C can cure about 8 out of 10 people who take them. One medication is called interferon, a manufactured version of a substance produced by the body's immune system. The most common type of interferon used is called pegylated interferon. The second is called ribavirin, an antiviral drug that kills specific types of viruses. The third is called an HCV protease inhibitor that works by stopping the virus from replicating or making more copies of itself. Ribavirin and the HCV protease inhibitor are pills taken daily. Pegylated interferon is a medication that is injected under the skin weekly.

Combination treatment with interferon and ribavirin for people with chronic HCV genotype 2 or 3, and an HCV protease inhibitor, pegylated interferon and ribavirin combination therapy for people with chronic HCV genotype 1 have been approved by the FDA. In addition to "Western" medications like pegylated interferon, ribavirin, and an HCV protease inhibitor there are also several alternative therapies that people have used to manage hepatitis C. These include milk thistle and licorice root. The Hepatitis C Support Project/HCV Advocate has several fact sheets on alternative treatments.

Not everyone with hepatitis C needs treatment. Your doctor will decide whether you should receive treatment based on various factors, such as how much your liver is damaged. Treatment for Hep C does not work for everyone. But for many people, treatment can keep the hepatitis C virus under control. Treatment works best for people who have been infected with hepatitis C for a shorter time, have little liver damage, and have less virus in their blood.

Hepatitis C treatment usually lasts 24 to 48 weeks. The drugs used to treat hepatitis C can cause some side effects for most people. The most common side effects of HCV treatment include flu-like symptoms, headache, nausea, fatigue, loss of appetite, muscle and joint pain, dry skin, rashes, itching and mental anxiety or depression. Ribavirin can cause birth defects and miscarriages. Both women and men taking ribavirin should use effective birth control during their treatment and for six months after treatment ends.

*Most people with chronic hepatitis C do not have symptoms and lead normal lives.*

## Hepcat???

There are different tests doctors use to tell if a person has hepatitis C. One kind of test measures antibodies in the blood. Antibodies are made by the body's immune system when it responds to a foreign invader like a virus. If your blood has hepatitis C antibodies, you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Having antibodies to hepatitis C only means you have been infected with hep C at one time, but in order to find out if you are currently infected with hepatitis C you will need to have a viral load test. The viral load test measures how much of the hepatitis C virus is in your blood. If you are being treated for HCV, viral load tests can help your doctor tell how well your medications are working and how long you should be treated. There are several different types of hepatitis C virus called genotypes.

Liver function tests measure how well your liver is working. These tests measure levels of liver enzymes and other substances in the blood. People with chronic hepatitis C often have increased levels of two liver enzymes called ALT and AST. Changes in liver enzyme levels may help your doctor tell whether your liver is damaged, but it's not a perfect test so other tests may be needed to find out if the liver is damaged.

Finally, a liver biopsy is a test that can help your doctor determine the health of your liver and how much it is damaged. In this test, the doctor inserts a long needle into the liver and takes a sample to examine under a microscope.