
a series of fact sheets written
by experts in the field of liver
disease

Women and HCV

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Hepatitis C (HCV) is an equal opportunity virus. It affects men and women from all ethnic backgrounds. In the United States, there is a higher prevalence of HCV among men. Although more people will die with HCV than of HCV, it is a complicated disease with a challenging treatment regimen. Women living with HCV have issues that differ from men's.

Women are more likely to clear HCV than men are. This means that after they contracted HCV, their bodies successfully fought it off. They will test positive for HCV antibodies, but further tests will show they do not actually have it.

Liver disease tends to progress more slowly in women than in men. Women are less likely to die from HCV than men are. Avoiding alcohol is one of the most important steps you can take in order to help your liver. The amounts of alcohol for healthy women (without HCV) are lower than the amounts for men. Women are more susceptible to alcohol-related health problems. Add in hepatitis C and you have a recipe for disaster.

Now some good news. There is effective treatment for HCV with success rates up to 79%. More good news, even if treatment does not eliminate the hepatitis C virus, people can still reap some benefit from trying it.

Women have a better chance of eliminating HCV with

treatment. Women have a higher success rate if they complete treatment prior to menopause. If you are a woman thinking about treatment, learn about the risks and benefits of treatment. Above all else, know the warnings about pregnancy and breastfeeding.

HCV is often a silent disease. Some people report feeling free of symptoms and are often surprised when they learn they have HCV. Sometimes the only sign of HCV is found when a blood test is done. This may occur when one of the liver enzymes, ALT, is abnormally high. This suggests that the liver might be inflamed, so more lab tests are ordered to find out the reason for the inflammation. Sometimes a person can be HCV+ and have normal ALT levels. This means that their medical providers will not have one of the usual clues that would suggest the need for further testing.

Why is this important for women to know? Some experts believe that the cut-off number for abnormal liver tests should actually be lower for women than the numbers most labs use. If you are a woman with any risk factors for HCV or your liver enzymes are on the high side of normal, get tested.

Although some people do not have any symptoms, there are HCV+ women who might not know they have it because their physical complaints are similar to other medical conditions. A classic example is menopause. Some women notice multiple changes at menopause as well as the years before menopause. These can include fatigue, body aches, and difficulty thinking clearly. These are also common HCV symptoms.

It is important to consult a medical provider about health changes. It is easy to confuse HCV symptoms for something else. The reverse is also true. Do not blame everything on HCV. Many medical conditions have similar symptoms to HCV. Some of these are very easy to treat.

Approximately 5 to 8% of the population has some sort of autoimmune disease; roughly, 3 out of 4 of these are women. Some autoimmune diseases share similar symptoms with HCV. Autoimmunity has been linked to HCV, but the relationship is not well-understood. Autoimmunity is a confused immune system in which the body starts attacking its own cells.

This sounds frightening, but not all autoimmune diseases are serious if treated. The most common autoimmune disease causes a low thyroid problem. For most people, this can be treated easily. There are other more serious autoimmune diseases, such as lupus. Talk to your medical provider about this, especially if you have a family history of autoimmune diseases.

Women with HCV want to know if it is okay to take hormones, such as birth control pills or hormone replacement therapy (HRT). From an HCV perspective, the answer is yes. HRT is controversial for other reasons not related to liver disease. Talk to your medical provider about this.

If you take medication for menstrual cramps or other causes of pain, ask your medical provider what the best medications are for pain management. Although acetaminophen is generally safe, it can cause liver damage at high doses or if taken with alcohol. Some pain medications, such as hydrocodone, are combined with acetaminophen. Find out how to use all medications safely.

Many other issues are unique to women. Some of these include transmission, birth control, and treatment side effects.

For more information see the complete series on Women and HCV at: www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets.asp

- *Women and Hepatitis C: An HCSP Guide*
- *Women and HCV: Being a Positive Mother*
- *Women and HCV: The Cosmetic Side Effects of HCV Treatment*
- *Women and HCV: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Breast-feeding*
- *Women and HCV: Reproduction Issues during Treatment*
- *Women and HCV: Supplements Commonly Used by Women*
- *Women and HCV: Transmission*
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For more information about hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HCV coinfections, please visit www.hcvadvocate.org.

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The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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