



Fact Sheet

South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control • www.scdhec.gov

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a liver disease caused by a virus. The number of new infections per year has declined from an average of 240,000 in the 1980s to about 25,000 in 2001. Most infections are due to illegal injection drug use. Transfusion-associated cases occurred prior to blood donor screening; but that now occurs in less than one per million transfused units of blood. An estimated 3.9 million people in the U.S., or 1.8 percent of all Americans, have been infected with HCV. Of those, 2.7 million are chronically infected.

What are the symptoms?

Eighty percent of the people infected have no signs or symptoms. Among the possible symptoms are jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes), fatigue, stomach pain, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and dark urine.

How is hepatitis C treated?

HCV positive persons should be evaluated by their doctor for liver disease. There are two drugs licensed for the treatment of persons with chronic hepatitis C. Drinking alcohol can make liver disease worse.

How do people catch this disease?

The transmission of hepatitis C happens when blood or body fluids from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. HCV is spread through sharing needles or “works” when “shooting” drugs, through needle sticks or sharp exposures on the job, or from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

What can be done to stop the spread of this disease?

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. To protect yourself, do not shoot drugs. If you are already shooting drugs, get into a treatment program to help you stop. If you can't stop, never share needles, syringes, water, or “works”, and get vaccinated against hepatitis A & B. Do not share personal care items that might have blood on them (like razors and toothbrushes). If you are a health care or public safety worker, always follow routine barrier precautions and safely handle needles and other sharps; get vaccinated against hepatitis B. Consider the risks if you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing. You might get infected if the tools have someone else's blood on them or if the artist or person doing the piercing does not follow good health practices.

HCV can be spread by sex, but this is rare. If you are having sex with more than one steady sex partner, use latex condoms correctly and every time to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. You should also get vaccinated against hepatitis B.

If you are HCV positive, do not donate blood, organs, or tissue.