



## Hepatitis C

### **What I need to know about Hepatitis C** **What is hepatitis C?**

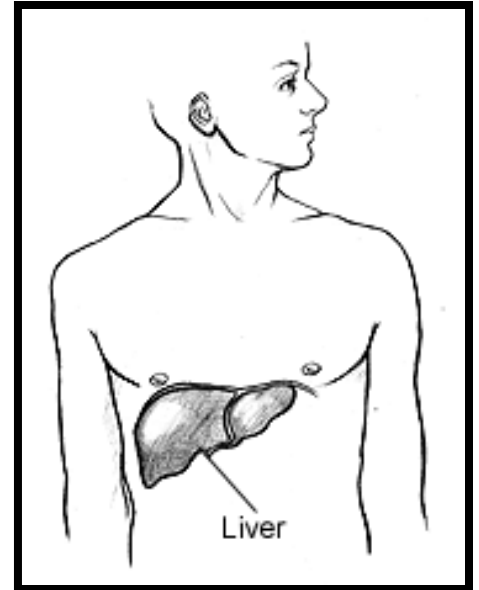
#### **Hepatitis C is a liver disease.**

Hepatitis makes your liver swell and stops it from working right. You need a healthy liver. The liver does many things to keep you alive. The liver fights infections and stops bleeding. It removes drugs and other poisons from your blood. The liver also stores energy for when you need it.

#### **What causes hepatitis C?**

##### **Hepatitis C is caused by a virus.**

A virus is a germ that causes sickness. (For example, the flu is caused by a virus.) People can pass viruses to each other. The virus that causes hepatitis C is called the hepatitis C virus.



### **Quick Facts about Hepatitis C**

✦ Hepatitis C is the most common bloodborne infection in the United States. About 35,000 new cases are diagnosed in the United States each year.

Hepatitis C is transmitted primarily when an infected person's blood comes into contact with the blood of a noninfected person.

✦ People who are at the highest risk for HCV infection are those who have used or experimented with injection drugs; received a blood transfusion, blood product, or organ transplant before July 1992; worked in health care and had a needlestick accident involving HCV-infected blood; or had multiple sex partners.

✦ A risk exists but is low (1 to 5 percent) for babies born to a mother with hepatitis C and for people who are in a monogamous sexual relationship with someone with hepatitis C; who have had other sexually transmitted diseases; who have had tattooing or body piercing done with unsterilized tools; or who have used cocaine intranasally (i.e., "snorted" it).

✦ Hepatitis C is not spread through sneezing, coughing, kissing, hugging, food or water, or casual contact.

✦ People who are newly infected have what is called acute hepatitis C. For about 15 to 40 percent of this group, the infection is short-term, goes away, and does not return. Others develop chronic (or long-lasting) hepatitis C, in which the virus stays in the liver, replicates itself, and injures the liver over time.

✦ Among people with chronic hepatitis C, most show no symptoms for up to 20 to 30 years; some have mild symptoms; and some have more serious symptoms.

**Chronic hepatitis C can cause liver disease, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and**



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**liver failure. However, persons who have been diagnosed with hepatitis C need to know that serious illness or death from the disease is by no means inevitable--especially if they take proper care of themselves and get the health care they need.**

### **What are the symptoms?**

- feeling tired
- feeling sick to your stomach
- having a fever
- not wanting to eat
- having stomach pain
- having diarrhea

### **Some people have**

- dark yellow urine
- light-colored stools
- yellowish eyes and skin

### **• What are the tests for Hepatitis C?**

Blood tests will determine if you have hepatitis C. Some people are referred to our office because of a positive blood test, however further blood work that we order may show that your initial test was a false positive – that you don't have hepatitis C.

If you are going to receive treatment, a liver biopsy is performed to determine the extent of the disease in your liver. Please refer to our web page on liver biopsy.needle.

### **How is hepatitis C treated?**

People who have a mild case of hepatitis C may only need to manage it by visiting their doctor regularly and following their doctor's recommendations--such as eating a nutritious diet, avoiding alcohol (because of its impact on the liver), and getting regular exercise.

For people with more severe hepatitis C, however, drug therapy may be needed. A drug called interferon is the mainstay of conventional treatment. Interferon is often combined with an antiviral (virus-fighting) drug called ribavirin. Such combination therapies are usually taken for 6 months to 1 year. Approximately 55 percent of patients treated with the combination of interferon and ribavirin for 1 year will achieve a sustained response (that is, a sustained benefit from treatment).<sup>1</sup> If a patient does not achieve a sustained response, his doctor may decide whether another course of treatment (re-treatment) is appropriate.

Combination regimens benefit many patients. However, their side effects can be difficult for some patients to tolerate. These side effects can include flu-like symptoms (such as body aches, fever, chills, and fatigue); nausea and other gastrointestinal problems; hair loss; emotional changes; skin reactions; and, in more severe cases, depression, organ damage, blood conditions, and other problems.