



Understanding Hepatitis C

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What You Need to Know About Hepatitis C

Learning how to manage hepatitis C treatment might feel like a challenge, especially at first. But understanding your diagnosis can help you control your condition. We want to help you get the most from your treatment. This booklet discusses how staying on track with lifestyle changes and medication therapy can help you manage your symptoms and live a full and active life.

The Liver and Hepatitis C

The liver helps digest food and change it into energy. The liver breaks down things like alcohol, caffeine and medications. It also plays a role in many other important body functions, such as blood clotting.

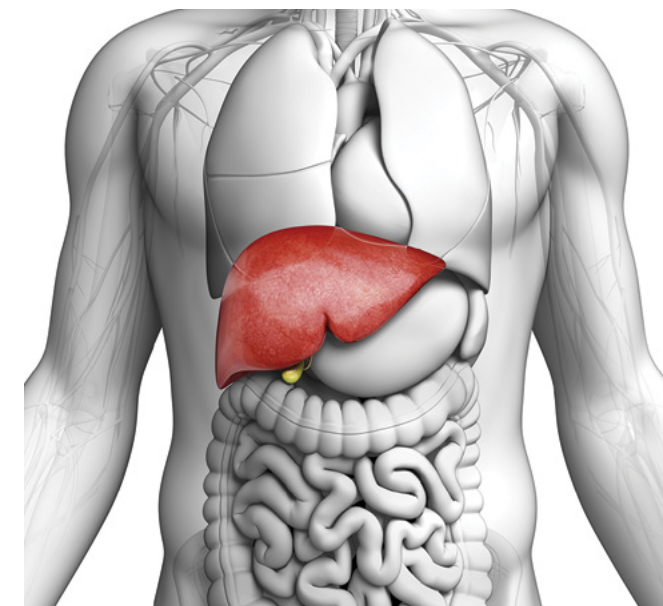
Hepatitis C is a virus. It is sometimes called HCV. It causes swelling that can damage the liver. There are other types of hepatitis. Some can be prevented by vaccines. But there is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

Diagnosis

Hepatitis C is often called a silent disease. It can infect a person for many years before it's discovered.¹ Many people don't have any symptoms. Others notice extreme tiredness or joint pain. Some notice stomach pain. With or without symptoms, the virus can damage the liver.¹

Your doctor likely used blood tests to diagnose you. Blood tests can show if a person has been exposed to the virus. The tests can also tell if the virus is active in the body. Blood tests can find signs of the virus in the body as early as one to two weeks after exposure.¹ New infections are considered acute in the first six months. For most people, the virus stays in the body to become chronic (long-term) hepatitis C.¹ This can cause other health problems.

Figure 1. The Liver



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Hepatitis C in the United States

There were an estimated **50,300** acute hepatitis C cases in 2018.²

An estimated **2.4 million** people were living with hepatitis C between 2013 and 2016.²

More than **15,000** deaths were attributed, in whole or in part, to hepatitis C in 2018.²

Genotypes

There are different types of hepatitis C viruses. These are called genotypes. There are seven genotypes and 67 subtypes.³ Genotypes 1, 2 and 3 are the most common in the United States.⁴

A blood test will find which genotype you have. It does not change during the course of your infection. Different genotypes require different medications. Most medications are taken for 8-12 weeks. But the length of treatment can differ from person to person.

Staying on Track With Treatment

Your doctor prescribed your treatment because you have a good chance of responding to it. But you must take your medication exactly as prescribed in order to increase your chances of achieving a sustained virologic response (SVR) which is considered a virologic cure. It is also important to know how your hepatitis C treatment might interact with food or other medications. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about any questions you have regarding your treatment.

If you are having a hard time staying on track with treatment, ask your doctor or pharmacist for help. Do not stop taking your medications without asking your doctor first. Missing doses might

prevent hepatitis C medications from working properly. In some cases, untreated hepatitis C can scar the liver and prevent it from working as it should. It can also cause other health problems. Making lifestyle changes and taking medications as prescribed can increase the chances of curing the infection and preventing liver damage.^{5,6}

How Hepatitis C is Spread

Hepatitis C is spread through direct contact with infected blood. The virus can be spread through⁷:

- Accidental needle sticks in healthcare settings
- Blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992
- Sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs

Less commonly, the virus can spread through unprotected sex with an infected person or from a mother to her baby during childbirth. It might be spread through unclean tattoo or piercing tools. It might also be spread through personal items with traces of blood, like razors or toothbrushes.⁷

How to Avoid Spreading Hepatitis C

When you have hepatitis C, you must avoid spreading the virus. You should also avoid being exposed to the virus again. It is possible to get infected again with the same or different genotype of hepatitis C. Take some basic precautions^{5,7-9}:

- Do not share needles or other drug materials, like straws.
- Do not donate blood or sperm.
- Cover open cuts or sores.
- Clean blood spills with a solution of one part household bleach and nine parts water.
- Don't share personal items that could have blood on them. This includes toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers or body piercing tools.



Hepatitis C is **not** spread through⁷⁻⁹:

- Hugging or holding hands
- Coughing or sneezing
- Sharing eating utensils (such as spoons and forks) or drinking glasses
- Contaminated food or water

Long-Term Effects

Your liver can heal minor damage by itself. But sometimes it can't fix severe damage. Injury to your liver over many years causes scar tissue. This is called fibrosis. Scar tissue cannot do what normal tissue can do. Severe fibrosis that stops your liver from working properly is called cirrhosis. Hepatitis C is a major cause of cirrhosis in the United States.⁷ Living with hepatitis C for a long time (10 years to 20 years) can raise your risk for cirrhosis.^{1,7}

Cirrhosis can cause many health problems.¹⁰ It can prevent the liver from filtering harmful

substances from the blood. This can cause fatigue and make it hard to think clearly. It might also increase the risk for liver cancer.^{7,10} One sign of advanced cirrhosis is ascites. This is a buildup of fluid in the belly that can be a sign of liver failure. It can cause sudden weight gain. Check your weight daily. Call your doctor if you suddenly gain more than 10 pounds or more than 2 pounds per day for three days in a row.¹¹ People who develop ascites often need a liver transplant to survive.¹¹

Some people with chronic hepatitis C will need a liver transplant.⁶ Hepatitis C is one of the most common reasons for liver transplantation in the United States.^{1,7} A transplant is needed when a severely damaged liver is unable to perform basic functions.^{6,9} If your doctor suggests transplantation, it's important to learn about what it involves. Ask your doctor about the long-term process of waiting for, receiving and living with a transplant.^{6,9}

Help Your Liver Heal

You can take simple steps to help your liver health^{5,9,12}:

- Avoid things that can harm your liver, like alcohol
- Eat well
- Keep a healthy weight
- Take medications as prescribed — at the right times and the correct doses
- Talk with your doctor before taking any other prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medications

Living With Hepatitis C

There are many other ways you can take care of yourself while treating hepatitis C. One important step is to ask your doctor about being vaccinated against hepatitis A and B and staying up to date on routine immunizations.^{7,13} You can also help your health by eating well, watching your weight, getting enough rest and staying active.

Healthful Eating

Most people with hepatitis C don't need a special diet.¹² The key is to eat healthfully and keep a healthy weight. This can sometimes be a challenge if you experience medication side effects such as^{12,14}:

- Bad taste in the mouth
- Diarrhea
- Mouth or throat pain
- Nausea
- No appetite
- Vomiting



Here are some tips for healthful eating^{12,14}:

- Think small. Instead of three large meals each day, try eating smaller meals or snacks at least every three to four hours. This can help you maintain energy and avoid nausea.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Aim for at least six to eight glasses of fluids a day.
- Avoid alcohol. There is no evidence that any use of alcohol is safe for people with hepatitis C.
 - The virus can weaken the liver's ability to break down alcohol.
 - Drinking too much alcohol can cause cirrhosis, advanced liver disease or liver cancer.
- Ask your doctor about dietary supplements.
 - Food is the best source of vitamins and minerals. But a supplement might be helpful. This is especially true if you have a weak appetite.
 - Talk to your doctor before taking any supplement. This includes herbal and OTC products. Don't take more than your doctor recommends. Tell your pharmacist about any supplements you are taking.

Smart Food Choices

Choosing the right foods can help your health. You might also ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian. Together, you can create a meal plan that works for you. The following table lists some ways to improve your food choices.

Tips for Healthful Eating^{12,15-17}

Foods to enjoy often

Grains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose whole grains. These provide more fiber and nutrients than refined grains. • Look for grains like brown rice, bulgur, whole oats or whole wheat.
Fruits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try fresh, frozen or canned fruits. • Buy fruits that are in season. They are often more affordable and at their peak flavor.
Vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose vegetables that are easy to prepare. • Buy prewashed bags of salad greens. Add cherry tomatoes for quick salads. • Try baby carrots or celery sticks for easy snacks.
Lean meats, fish, dried beans and eggs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose these foods as good sources of protein. They can help your body fight infection and heal damaged liver cells. • Boil, bake or stir-fry foods instead of deep-frying them.
Dairy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select low-fat or fat-free milk, cheese and yogurt. • Limit higher-fat dairy products, like butter and cream.
"Good" fats (unsaturated)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know that flaxseed and olive oil are good sources of unsaturated fat. • Try fatty fish like salmon, sardines or albacore tuna. • Add nuts or seeds to other foods for a healthy crunch. • Use fats sparingly. All fats are high in calories.

Foods to limit or avoid

Salt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the salt in your diet. This can help you keep a healthy weight. It can help you control your blood pressure. It can also prevent swelling in your legs or belly if you have cirrhosis. • Limit processed foods like crackers, chips and canned soups. These are high in salt. • Use herbs and other seasonings in place of salt. • Read food labels to know which foods are high in salt.
Sugar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit sugary foods and drinks. They tend to be high in calories and low on nutrition. • Keep in mind that eating too many sweets leaves less room for more healthful foods.
"Bad" fats (saturated and trans fats)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit animal-based products, which are sources of saturated fat. • Avoid fried foods and store-bought baked goods and pastries. These are high in trans fats.

Keeping a Healthy Weight

Some people with hepatitis C have a hard time keeping on enough weight. This might be because some hepatitis C medications can cause side effects that make it hard to eat.¹²

Other people with hepatitis C have a hard time keeping off extra weight. Being overweight is one cause of the buildup of fat in the liver. This is called fatty liver. This can increase the risk of liver damage and cirrhosis.¹²

To see if your weight is at a healthy level, you can check your body mass index (BMI).¹⁸ You can use a BMI calculator like the one from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm). Enter your height and weight to calculate your BMI.

Categories
Below 18.5 = underweight
18.5–24.9 = normal weight
25–29.9 = overweight
30 or higher = obese

A BMI below 18.5 means your weight might be too low for your height. A BMI between 18.5 and 24.9 is considered normal. A BMI of

25 or more means you might need to lose weight. But BMI values can mean different things for different body types.¹⁸ Talk to your doctor about what your BMI means for your health. Together you can make a plan for keeping a healthy weight.

Resting to Recharge Your Body

Living with hepatitis C can make you feel tired. Your medications can also affect your sleep and make it hard to feel rested.^{6,7} But your body needs rest to heal and repair itself.¹⁹ Rest gives you time to recharge. These tips might help you get added rest:

- Pace yourself. Make sure all your tasks are worth your time and effort. Take your time. Do the most important things earlier in the day, when you are likely to have more energy.
- Plan your activities. For example, write your shopping list in the order you'll find the items in the store. This can limit how much time you will be on your feet.
- Sleep well. General guidelines say adults should get about eight hours of sleep.²⁰ Talk to your doctor about how much sleep is best for your health. If you have trouble sleeping, try limiting daytime naps and avoiding electronics around bedtime.^{14,19}
- Reduce stress. Take time for quiet activities. This might mean reading or listening to music.¹⁹ Relaxation training or a support group might also help.
- Avoid large meals, especially close to bedtime.^{14,19}
- Don't do too much. Be honest about what you can do each day. Doing too much will make you more tired. If possible, cut back on duties at home or work.¹⁴



Staying Active

You might not feel like exercising when you are tired. But staying active is as important as getting enough rest.¹² Regular exercise can boost your energy. It can strengthen your body. It can also help you relieve stress, manage your weight and sleep better.^{12,14}

Choose an activity you enjoy. You might consider some of the following activities:

- Cycling
- Low-impact aerobics
- Swimming
- Walking
- Weight training

Take it slowly at first. See how your body reacts to the activity. Try to exercise regularly. Ask a friend to join you.

Always check with your doctor before starting an exercise program. You might also want to meet with an exercise specialist for people with hepatitis C. Together you can make a plan that is right for your fitness level.



Emotional Health

Being diagnosed with a disease like hepatitis C might feel overwhelming, especially at first. You might feel anxious or depressed. This is normal. Depression can also be a symptom of hepatitis C and a side effect of certain hepatitis C medications.^{1,7,21} It is important to know the signs of depression and when to get help.

Symptoms of depression can include some or all of the following²²:

- Aches and pains that don't go away with treatment
- Being tired or lacking energy
- Eating too much or too little
- Feeling hopeless or negative
- Feeling restless or irritable
- Feeling sad, empty or anxious most of the time
- Feeling worthless, helpless or guilty
- Having a hard time concentrating, remembering or making decisions
- Losing interest or pleasure in activities that you used to enjoy
- Moving or talking more slowly
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Thinking about death or suicide

If you have thoughts of suicide, contact the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline by calling or texting 988 or visiting [988lifeline.org/chat](https://www.988lifeline.org/chat). You can also get help by calling 911, your local emergency services number or your doctor or mental health professional.

Talk with your doctor if you feel depressed. Your doctor might suggest counseling, an antidepressant medication or both. In counseling, you can talk with a therapist about your thoughts and feelings.

Antidepressants help balance brain chemicals that affect your mood. It may take 2-4 weeks to begin working. You might notice side effects sooner. These might include^{22,23}:

- Headache
- Nausea
- Restlessness
- Sexual problems
- Sleep problems

Talk with your doctor if your antidepressant does not help. Do not stop taking the medication on your own. Your doctor might need to adjust your dose or prescribe a different antidepressant.

Boost Your Mood

- Get enough sleep. Aim for around eight hours a night, but talk to your doctor about how much sleep is best for your health.²⁰ Try to go to bed and get up at the same times each day.
- Reduce stress. Try calming activities, like yoga or meditation.
- Express yourself. Write your thoughts in a journal. Tell family, friends or support groups how you feel. Share positive and negative thoughts.
- Stay active. Choose activities you enjoy.





Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

Some medications used to treat hepatitis C can cause severe birth defects. Ask your doctor what type of birth control might be needed during your treatment. For example, a couple must use two forms of birth control to avoid pregnancy if either partner is taking a ribavirin product. This could mean using a condom with spermicidal jelly as well as a diaphragm. This should continue for nine months after the last dose.^{24,25} Talk with your doctor or pharmacist about any other precautions you should take during treatment.

Some hepatitis C medications shouldn't be taken with hormonal birth control.²⁶ Make sure your doctor is aware of all of the medications you are taking.²⁷ In some cases, it might be necessary to use more than one form of birth control for adequate protection.²⁷

About six of every 100 babies born to a mother with hepatitis C become infected with the virus.⁷ If a male with hepatitis C fathers a child with a female who does not have the virus while pregnant, he can't pass the virus on to the unborn baby.²⁴

If you plan to breastfeed during your treatment, talk to your doctor about the options for feeding your baby. The virus is not passed through breast milk.⁷⁻⁹ But it might spread through cracked or bleeding nipples.⁷

We provide this information because the more you know about hepatitis C — the better you'll be able to manage it. Additionally, the AllianceRx Walgreens Pharmacy Specialty360 Therapy Team is here to support you with dependable, personalized service to help manage your medication side effects and stay on track with your prescribed therapy. We look forward to being a member of your healthcare team and helping you get the best results from your treatment.

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Resources

You might find it helpful to contact these organizations for additional support and resources.*

American Liver Foundation (ALF)

www.liverfoundation.org/for-patients/about-the-liver/diseases-of-the-liver/hepatitis-c/

800-GO-LIVER (800-465-4837)

www.facebook.com/liverinfo

Twitter: @liverUSA

The ALF is dedicated to the prevention, treatment and cure of hepatitis and other liver diseases. The ALF's website includes resources for diagnosis, treatment and support.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/index.htm

800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)

www.facebook.com/CDC

Twitter: @CDCgov

The CDC works with state health departments and other groups to promote health, prevent disease, injury and disability, and prepare for new health threats. The CDC website includes frequently asked questions, fact sheets.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

www.hepatitis.va.gov/hcv/index.asp

844-MyVA311 (6982311)

www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs

Twitter: @DeptVetAffairs

The VA is the largest single provider of medical care to people with hepatitis C in the United States. The VA website offers videos, printable fact sheets, charts and other tools for keeping track of treatment schedules, side effects and lifestyle changes.

*The referenced organizations are provided for informational purposes only. They are not affiliated with, and have not provided funding to AllianceRx Walgreens Pharmacy for, this booklet. AllianceRx Walgreens Pharmacy does not endorse or recommend any specific organization.

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