

Hepatitis C

Modes of Transmission

Hepatitis C is found in blood, and can be spread by:

- Sharing injection drug equipment
- Blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992
- Receiving clotting factor concentrates before 1987
- An infected mother to her infant during delivery
- Occupational exposure through needle stick
- Sexual contact (rarely)

There have been no studies that have shown an association with military service or exposure resulting from the following: medical, surgical, or dental procedures; tattooing; acupuncture; ear piercing; or foreign travel. If transmission from such exposure does occur, it is too infrequent to detect.

Symptoms

The incubation period can vary from 2 to 26 weeks, with an average between 6 to 9 weeks.

Acute Hepatitis C

People who are infected with hepatitis C are usually asymptomatic. However, if a patient has acute hepatitis C, symptoms may include:

- Jaundice
- dark urine
- light stool
- fever
- nausea
- vomiting
- fatigue
- abdominal pain and
- anorexia

Chronic Hepatitis C

Chronic hepatitis C refers to an infection where the body is not able to eliminate the virus. Most of those infected are asymptomatic and it may take 10-30 years from the original time of infection to recognize chronic hepatitis C, about 20 years to recognize cirrhosis, and 30 or more years to recognize liver cancer.

Testing

Hepatitis C status can be determined using results of several commonly ordered tests. The following interpretations are appropriate:

Anti-HCV by EIA	Anti-HCV by RIBA	Qualitative HCV-RNA	Interpretation
+	+	+	Acute infection
+	+	-	Resolved infection or intermittent viremia
+	-	-	False-positive EIA
-	-	+	False negative anti-HCV (early infection or immunocompromised host)

Vaccination and Prophylaxis

There is no vaccine currently available for the hepatitis C virus.

Treatment

Treatment options for hepatitis C are determined by blood test, biopsy results, and other factors, and are not based solely on the presence of symptoms, since the disease is typically asymptomatic.

- **Pegylated Interferon:** a form of interferon, given once a week. The pegylation of the interferon delays clearance rate in the body, and maintains higher interferon levels in the blood.
- **Ribavirin:** is given by mouth in combination with alpha interferon, and the length of treatment is determined by the physician.
- **Combination of Interferon and Ribavirin:** generally when treating patients for HCV the two treatments are given together, and is considered the most effective treatment for reducing the HCV viral load.

Pregnancy and Perinatal Issues

Transmission Through Breast Milk

It is not currently known if hepatitis C can be transmitted through breast milk; there is not sufficient information to determine if there is an adequate amount of the virus present in breast milk to pose a high risk to the infant. Generally, hepatitis C positive women are advised that they may breast-feed.