

Hepatitis C Guide

Types of Hep C Tests

- A blood test called an HCV antibody test, is used to find out if someone has ever been infected with the hepatitis C virus. This test looks for antibodies, which are proteins released into the bloodstream when someone gets infected with the virus that causes Hepatitis C. If someone knows they have tested positive in the past, this test is not for them.
- People who have positive HCV antibody tests are given a follow-up HCV RNA test to learn whether they have active infection.

After Testing Positive

- After testing positive, the next step is a confirmatory RNA test.
- Confirmatory tests are looking for an active infection.
 - They may also do a liver function test to check for any damage to the liver or if a person needs additional treatment.
 - A provider will discuss with the person about next steps.

If I have Tested Positive Before?

If you have tested positive in the past, it is always good to follow up with a primary care doctor or a specialist. To ensure there is no new infection and check on the state of the liver.

Where to Find a Provider and Further Testing

Vivent Health

303-393-8050

Denver Health STI Clinic

303-602-3540

Colorado Health Network

303-962-5317

Testing with your primary care provider is also possible.

Information in this pamphlet is based on the CDC and HeyDenvers protocol.

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/cfaq.htm#E4>



Queer-Focused Sexual Health Center

HeyDenver.org
303-962-2880

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be affected. Heavy alcohol use, toxins, some medications, and certain medical conditions can cause hepatitis. However, hepatitis is often caused by a virus. In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the Hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, long-term illness. Hepatitis C is often described as “acute,” meaning a new infection, or “chronic,” meaning long-term infection.

- Acute hepatitis C occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C can be a short-term illness, but for most people, acute infection leads to chronic infection.
- Chronic Hepatitis C can be a lifelong infection if left untreated. Chronic hepatitis C can cause serious health problems, including liver damage, cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and even death.

Common Symptoms

Many people newly infected with HCV **don't have symptoms**, don't look or feel sick, and therefore don't know they are infected. For people who develop symptoms, they usually happen 2–12 weeks after exposure to HCV and can include **yellow skin or eyes, not wanting to eat, upset stomach, throwing up, stomach pain, fever, dark urine, light-colored stool, joint pain, and feeling tired.**

Most people with chronic hepatitis C don't have any symptoms or have only general symptoms like chronic fatigue and depression. Many people eventually develop chronic liver disease, which can range from mild to severe and include cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer. Chronic liver disease in people with hepatitis C usually happens slowly, without any signs or symptoms, over several decades.

Some people have no symptoms at all. The only way to know if you have HCV is to get tested.

How is Hep C transmitted?

Hepatitis C transmits through blood. In the right environment Hep C can live outside the body for two weeks. It is important that if you have any circumstances in your life that bring you into contact with blood you take proper precautions and test as needed.

People recommended for routine testing are:

- People who use injection drugs or did so in the past or share works/snorting equipment
- People born between 1945-1965
- People who have received transfusions or organ transplants before 1987
- People who have gotten piercings or tattoos outside of a sterile shop
- People who have kinks or fetishes that involve blood
- Shared personal care items (toothbrush, razors).

Treatment

- Current treatments usually involve just 8–12 weeks of oral antiviral therapy (pills) and cure over 90% with few side effects.
- In more severe cases of Hep C, there may be liver damage. In that case the person may need a liver transplant. Several tests and follow up would be needed to determine that.
- There is no vaccine available for Hep C but there is vaccinations against Hepatitis A and B. Getting these vaccines can help prevent any liver damage that Hep A and B can cause.
- Some people clear HCV from their bodies after the acute phase, an outcome known as spontaneous viral clearance. In studies of people diagnosed with acute HCV, rates of spontaneous viral clearance have varied from 15% to 25%.

Preventing Hep C Infection

Hepatitis C can be prevented by education and action. Below are some helpful ways to help you prevent Hep C:

- Use new, sterile syringes and injection equipment every time you inject.
- Don't share works, snorting equipment, or personal care items (toothbrush, razors).
- Although the risk of sexual transmission of HCV is considered to be low, using condoms and other barrier methods has been shown to reduce the chance of sexually transmitted infections.
- If you partake in activities that involve the exchange of blood, test for HCV every 3-6 months to ensure you can treat infections quickly.

Hepatitis C is not spread through breast milk, food, water or casual contact such as hugging, kissing and sharing food or drinks with an infected person.

Untreated Hep C

Hepatitis C is an infection that can affect the liver very seriously, it needs treatment to be cured.

About 20% of people can clear out Hep C on their own, but this is a very rare trait.

The function of the liver is

- Filtration.
- Digestion.
- Metabolism and Detoxification.
- Protein synthesis.
- Storage of vitamins and minerals.

People can live with a partial liver but cannot live without a liver all together. Without a functioning liver people are at risk of their blood not clotting, causing uncontrolled bleeding. Toxins and chemicals will build up in the blood, and swelling of the brain and body.