

What is Hepatitis C

OVERVIEW

Hepatitis C, or HCV, is an infection of the liver that's caused due to the hepatitis C virus. According to webMD, approximately 2.4 million people in the United States have this liver disease, but not all of them may experience symptoms.



There are several stages to HCV infections:

1. Incubation Period

This stage refers to infection by hepatitis C virus followed by the start or onset of symptoms. For most people, the average incubation period is 45 days, however, it can last anywhere from two weeks to 80 days.

2. Acute HCV

People with acute HCV experience symptoms on a short-term basis—on average, symptoms last for six months after the incubation period. It's possible for your body to eliminate the virus on its own.

3. Chronic HCV

If, however, your body does not eliminate the hepatitis C virus, you will experience chronic HCV. In fact, its incidence is 85% of most cases. Chronic HCV can be serious; if left untreated can lead to cirrhosis of the liver and eventually liver cancer.

What is Chronic HCV?

Chronic HCV is a long-lasting liver disease that happens in more than 85% of all cases of hepatitis C infections. Most people with HCV do not have symptoms and, as a result, are undiagnosed for hepatitis C.

However, for some, the disease can affect the liver, causing it to be scarred, which is cirrhosis. Cirrhosis of the liver can occur some 20 to 30 years after first being exposed to the hepatitis C virus. This can eventually lead to liver cancer.

How is Hepatitis C Transmitted?

Transmission of the hepatitis C virus occurs through exposure to infected blood or bodily fluids that contain blood. Some examples include:

- Injection-drug use
- Babies with an HCV-infected mother
- Sharing personal items such as razors or toothbrushes

What are the Symptoms of Chronic HCV?

Symptoms of chronic HCV include:

- Chronic fatigue
- Depression
- Chronic liver diseases such as cirrhosis

You are more at risk for developing cirrhosis or liver cancer if you drink or are infected with hepatitis B or have HIV.

Some patients with chronic HCV may also develop other conditions due to hepatitis C. These can include:

- Diabetes mellitus
- Inflammation of the kidneys
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma

Treatment for Chronic HCV is Safe When Performed by a Board-Certified Gastroenterologist

Screening for hepatitis C is key to detecting chronic HCV, especially if you have not experienced any acute symptoms of HCV. A gastroenterologist can help diagnose—using a serum antibody test—and develop a treatment plan for your chronic HCV. This can include:

- Antiviral Medicines
- Avoiding alcohol as it can accelerate cirrhosis and liver disease
- Liver transplant (if you have cirrhosis or liver disease)