

OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS  
**Hepatitis C Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q. What is hepatitis C?**

**A.** Hepatitis C is a disease that harms the liver. The liver is a big organ in the upper right side of the belly. A virus causes this disease. The virus is called the hepatitis C virus. It spreads from person to person through contact with blood. This can happen in a few ways, like sharing drug needles or having sex.

**Q. What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?**

**A.** Most people with hepatitis C have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Feeling tired or weak
- Lack of hunger
- Nausea
- Muscle or joint aches
- Weight loss

In most cases, hepatitis C lasts for many years. That can lead to liver scarring, called "cirrhosis." Many people with cirrhosis have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Swelling in the belly and legs, and fluid build-up in the lungs
- Bruising or bleeding easily
- Trouble taking in a full breath
- Feeling full in the belly
- Yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes, called jaundice
- Confusion that can come on suddenly
- Coma

**Q. How did I get the disease?**

**A.** You can catch the hepatitis C virus if you have contact with the blood of someone who is infected. This can happen if you:

- Share drug needles or cocaine straws
- Use infected needles for tattooing, acupuncture, or piercings
- Share toothbrushes, razors, or other things that could have blood on them
- Got a blood transfusion in the United States before 1990 (after that time, blood banks started testing donated blood for hepatitis C)
- Have sex with someone who is infected

A pregnant woman who is infected can also give hepatitis C to her baby.

Some people who have hepatitis C do not remember how they were infected. In the United States, many people with hepatitis C were born between 1945 and 1965. If you were born during these years, your doctor might want to test you for hepatitis C even if you did not do any of the things that put you at risk of infection.

**Q. Is there a test for hepatitis C?**

**A.** Yes. Your doctor might order a few tests:

- Blood tests can show:
- If you have hepatitis C
- What type of the virus you have (there are at least 6 types)
- Which treatment will work best for you

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If you have hepatitis C, your doctor will also want to know if you have any liver scarring. Ways to check for scarring include:

- Blood tests
- Liver scan – This is a type of imaging test that can show how much scarring you have. Not all doctors have access to the machine that does the scan.
- Biopsy – For this test, a doctor puts a needle into your liver and takes out a small sample of tissue. The sample will show how bad the damage is.

**Q. Is there anything I can do to protect my liver?**

**A.** Yes, you can:

- Avoid alcohol
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B
- Get vaccinated for pneumonia, the flu, and other diseases
- Ask your doctor or nurse before taking any over-the-counter pain medicines (these medicines can sometimes damage the liver).
- Avoid marijuana

**Q. What if I want to get pregnant?**

**A.** If you want to get pregnant, talk to your doctor or nurse first. About 1 in 20 women who have hepatitis C pass the virus on to the baby during pregnancy. That number goes up in women who are also infected with HIV.

**Q. What will my life be like?**

**A.** Many people with hepatitis C are able to live normal lives. Treatment can cure the disease in many cases. If you have hepatitis C, it is still safe to:

- Hug, kiss, and touch other people (but you can spread the infection through sex)
- Share forks, spoons, cups, and food
- Sneeze or cough
- Breastfeed

**Q. How is hepatitis C treated?**

**A.** There are different medicines to treat hepatitis C. Some of them only work on certain forms of the hepatitis C virus. The best medicines for you depend on:

- What type of hepatitis C you have (there are several types; type 1 is the most common in the United States)
- If you have been treated for hepatitis C before
- How much liver damage you have
- What other health problems you have
- What other medicines you take

You will likely have to take a combination of 2 or more medicines. The medicines come in pill form. Sometimes, 2 or more medicines are combined into 1 pill. Treatment usually lasts 3 months. But for some people, it can be as short as 2 months.

If you are being treated for hepatitis C, it is very important that you:

- Take **all** your medicines exactly how your doctor or nurse tells you to
- Never skip doses
- Never stop any of your medicines unless your doctor or nurse tells you to
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**Q. What happens if I do not take hepatitis medicines as directed?**

**A.** If you take these medicines the wrong way, they probably will not work as well as they should. You can also end up doing yourself more harm than good. With some of the medicines, if people skip doses or do not take all their medicines, the hepatitis C virus can quickly become "resistant." That means the virus learns to outsmart the medicines, and so the medicines will not work.

**Q. Do the medicines for hepatitis C cause side effects?**

**A.** Yes, they can cause side effects, but most of them are not serious. Some of the medicines used to treat hepatitis can make you tired or sick to your stomach, or give you headaches. If you are being treated for hepatitis C, tell your doctor or nurse any time you get a side effect that bothers you.

In very rare cases, people need to stop taking their medicines because of side effects. But **do not stop taking your medicines** because of side effects until you speak with your doctor or nurse. Only he or she can tell if you need to stop the medicines. Besides, your doctor or nurse might have a way to deal with the side effects so that you can keep taking the medicines. For example, if you are sick to your stomach, your doctor or nurse might give you a medicine to help with that. The point is, there are ways to deal with side effects so that you are comfortable enough to keep taking your medicines.

Even if your doctor can't make your side effects go away completely, remember that you only need to take these medicines for a short time. If you put up with some side effects, there is a good chance your hepatitis C will be cured.

**Q. What if I already take other medicines?**

**A.** Some hepatitis C medicines can cause serious problems when they are taken with certain other medicines. Or they might not work as well when taken with certain other medicines. These are called "drug interactions." To prevent problems due to drug interactions, review a list of all of your medicines, including herbal and non-prescription medicines, with your doctor whenever you start a new medicine.

**Q. Will I be cured?**

**A.** If you take your medicines exactly the way you are supposed to, the chances of being cured are very good. People who have not been treated for hepatitis C before are cured over 90 percent of the time. People who have failed treatment before or who have cirrhosis have a slightly lower chance of cure.

At least 3 to 6 months after you finish treatment, your doctor or nurse will give you a blood test to see if you are cured. If you are not cured after your first course of treatment, he or she might suggest trying treatment again or waiting for new medicines to come out.

Even if you are cured of hepatitis C, this does not protect you from getting infected again. You can get hepatitis C again if you have contact with the blood of someone who has the virus.

Further, if you had cirrhosis prior to getting cured, you are still at an increased risk of Liver cancer. And, therefore will need to remain in Chronic Clinic (while incarcerated) for liver cancer screening.

Nurse Educator's Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

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