

## HEPATITIS C

### **What is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). More than 90% of people never have symptoms, and about 50-80% of those infected will develop chronic, long-term hepatitis C, putting them at risk for cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), cancer of the liver and liver failure.

### **How is hepatitis C spread?**

The virus is spread when blood from an infected person enters the body of a person who is not infected. HCV is spread through sharing needles or "works" when "shooting" drugs, through needle sticks or sharps exposures on the job, or from an infected mother to her baby during birth. The risk of sexual transmission appears to be low. Other persons at risk include kidney dialysis patients and persons who live with someone infected with hepatitis C. Hepatitis C is not spread by sneezing, coughing, hugging, breastfeeding, sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses, or other casual contact. It is not spread by food or water.

How high is the risk of getting hepatitis C through a blood transfusion?

Thanks to the tests developed for hepatitis C, the risk is now very low. Donated blood has been routinely tested for hepatitis C since the early 1990s.

### **What are symptoms of hepatitis C?**

Symptoms may include fever, lack of energy, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, and jaundice (yellow color to the whites of the eyes or skin). Many people who have hepatitis C have very mild symptoms or no symptoms at all.

### **How soon do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms appear between 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure, usually 4-12 weeks.

### **How is hepatitis C diagnosed?**

The virus is diagnosed by blood tests.

### **What is the treatment for hepatitis C?**

The Food and Drug Administration has approved some antiviral drugs for treating chronic hepatitis C. Unfortunately, drug treatment does not help all persons who have hepatitis C. Consult your health care provider for further information. Persons with hepatitis C should avoid alcohol or drug use, and use medications (both prescription and non-prescription) only with the approval of their healthcare provider. Check with your provider about all medications you are taking, including nonprescription and herbal remedies.

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### **How long is a person infectious (contagious)?**

An infected person is contagious with hepatitis C from one or more weeks before symptoms begin and throughout the acute infection (symptomatic illness). After they recover from their initial illness, those that develop a chronic infection will continue to carry the virus in their blood and body fluids and remain contagious for the rest of their lives. Many people with hepatitis C can feel fine for up to 20 years, but even without symptoms, they can still spread hepatitis C to others.

### **Who should be tested for hepatitis C?**

#### **You should be tested if you:**

- ever injected illegal drugs, even one time, or many years ago
- received clotting factor concentrates produced before 1987
- were ever on long-term kidney dialysis
- have persistently abnormal liver enzymes
- were notified that you received blood from a donor who later tested positive for hepatitis C
- received a transfusion of blood or blood components before July 1992
- received an organ transplant before July 1992
- received a needle stick or mucosal exposure to blood infected with hepatitis C virus
- are a child born to a mother infected with hepatitis C

### **If I have hepatitis C, how can I avoid spreading it to others?**

- Do not share needles or other drug equipment.
- Do not donate blood or organs.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers or any other personal items that might have your blood on them.
- Let health care providers who may be exposed to your blood know that you have hepatitis C
- Although sexual transmission appears to be low, inform your sexual partner that you have hepatitis C and consider using latex condoms or other barriers.
- Cover cuts or open sores on your skin.

### **Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?**

While there are vaccines available for both hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine against hepatitis C.

Acute Hepatitis C is a Washington State reportable disease and must be reported to your local health department. In Snohomish County, contact Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response at 425.339.5278, Monday-Friday, 8:00AM-5:00PM.