



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV).

How do you get hepatitis C?

HCV is spread through contact with infected blood. People who have received blood transfusions in the past, IV drug users, household members and sexual partners of infected persons, infants born to infected mothers, and people who may be exposed to other people's blood at work are at highest risk of getting HCV. HCV can also be spread through sexual contact or unsanitary tattooing and piercing practices.

Blood donations are routinely screened for HCV in Hawaii, and those that test positive for HCV are not given to patients.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

The symptoms may include loss of appetite, nausea, stomach pain, fatigue, and jaundice (yellowing) of the skin and whites of the eyes. If the infection continues for more than 6 months, the condition is called chronic HCV. Many persons with HCV infection do not experience any symptoms.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms usually begin 7 weeks following infection with the virus, but can begin in 2 to 24 weeks.

For how long is a person contagious?

A person with HCV is believed to be contagious one or more weeks before the start of symptoms and throughout the disease. People with chronic HCV are contagious for life. Mothers who wish to breastfeed should discuss their condition with their baby's doctor.

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

HCV positive persons should see their doctor regularly to check liver function. There are some medicines that a doctor can prescribe for patients with chronic HCV infection. HCV patients should avoid drinking alcohol because it can make liver disease worse.

How can you keep from getting it?

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV.

Take measures to avoid contact with blood and other body fluids.

Do not shoot drugs. If you shoot drugs, stop and get into a treatment program. If you can't stop, never share needles, syringes, water or "works".

Do not share personal care items that might have blood on them, such as razors or toothbrushes.

If your job requires exposure to other people's blood, always follow routine barrier precautions and safely handle needles and sharps.

If you have sex with more than one partner, use latex condoms correctly every time you have sex.

Consider the risks if you are thinking about getting a tattoo or body piercing. You might get infected if the tools have someone else's blood on them or if the artist or person who did the piercing does not follow good health practices.

Persons infected with hepatitis must not donate blood, organs or tissue.

For more information, see the CDC's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/index.htm>