**Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Hepatitis C**

***What is hepatitis?***

 Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. This inflammation can be caused by factors including heavy alcohol use, toxins, some medications, and some medical conditions. However, hepatitis is most commonly caused by a virus.

 In the United States, the most common types of viral hepatitis caused by three distinct viruses: hepatitis A is caused by the hepatitis A virus (HAV); hepatitis B is caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV); and hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). While someone can be infected with more than one virus at a time, a person will not progress from one type of viral hepatitis to other. Each virus is spread in slightly different ways.

For additional information, go to:

Hepatitis A:

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hav/afaq.htm#overview>

<http://tn.gov/health/article/hepatitis-hepA>

Hepatitis B:

 <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hbv/bfaq.htm#overview>

<http://tn.gov/health/article/hepatitis-hepB>

<http://www.hbvadvocate.org/>

Hepatitis C:

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/cfaq.htm#overview>

<http://tn.gov/health/article/hepatitis-hepC>

<http://hcvadvocate.org/>

***What is hepatitis C?***

 Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). **Acute** hepatitis C refers to the period shortly after becoming infected with HCV. The infection ranges from mild illness with few or no symptoms to severe illness requiring hospitalization. Of those that become infected with HCV, roughly 20% will be able to get rid of or clear the virus on their own within six months. The remaining 80% will remain infected for more than six months and develop what is called **chronic** hepatitis C.

***Why is it important to know about hepatitis C?***

 The liver is a vital organ, meaning it is essential to keep a person alive. It performs more than 500 functions, including processing nutrients, filtering the blood, and fighting infections. Inflammation or damage will impact the function of the liver. If a person remains infected for a long period of time, serious health problems such as liver disease, liver failure and liver cancer can develop.

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

 HCV is spread when blood from a person infected with the virus enters the body of someone who is not yet infected. This is often referred to as **blood-to-blood contact**. Today, most people become infected through needles, syringes or any other equipment used to inject drugs. HCV can also be spread by getting tattoos or body piercings if non-sterile instruments are used. Much less commonly, HCV can be sexually transmitted, more often among men who have sex with men and a history of multiple sex partners.

***How can hepatitis C be prevented?***

 While there is **no vaccine** against HCV, there are other ways to decrease the risk of becoming infected:

* Avoid sharing needles, syringes or any other equipment (e.g., water, cottons, cookers) used to inject drugs.
* Do not get tattoos or body piercings in unlicensed facilities or informal settings
* Do not share personal items (e.g., toothbrush, clippers, manicure set) that might come in contact with someone’s blood even in microscopic amounts

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

 Many people who have HCV do not have symptoms and therefore don’t know they are infected. If present, symptoms may include: fever, fatigue, poor appetite, nausea / vomiting, dark urine, gray colored stool, joint pain and yellowing of the skin / eyes. These symptoms are similar to other diseases, including HAV and HBV.

***When do the symptoms occur?***

 If present during **acute** infection, symptoms will appear two weeks to six months after infection. If present during **chronic** infection, they can take decades to develop, and often indicate advanced liver disease.

***How does someone know if they have hepatitis C?***

 The only way to know if someone has HCV is to get a blood test. Most providers do not routinely run HCV-related tests during regular health exams. If a person is at risk for getting HCV, he / she can ask their provider to perform the appropriate tests.

 The first test a healthcare provider will usually order is the Hepatitis C antibody test, which looks for antibodies to HCV. A positive HCV antibody test indicates that a person has been exposed to the hepatitis C virus at some time. However, the result **does not** necessarily mean the person is currently infected with HCV. Additional testing will help the provider determine whether the person is currently infected or if they were able to clear the virus on their own.

***Who should get tested for hepatitis C?***

 The following individuals are recommended for HCV testing:

* Individuals who injected drugs, even just once or many years ago
* Individuals with certain medical conditions (e.g., chronic liver disease, HIV / AIDS)
* Individuals who received donated blood or organs before 1992
* Anyone born from 1945 through 1965
* Individuals with abnormal liver tests or liver disease
* Health and safety workers exposed to blood on the job through a needle stick or injury with a sharp object
* Individuals on hemodialysis
* Individuals born to a mother with HCV

***Where can someone get tested for hepatitis C?***

 Individuals interested in getting tested for hepatitis C should ask their primary care provider. Services may be available in some community health centers and some health departments

***If someone is told they have hepatitis C, where can they get treated for hepatitis C?***

 If an individual has been told that they have hepatitis C, they should continue to see their primary care provider regarding their general health. They can also provide counseling to prevent further spread of HCV. Most primary care providers do not have the capacity to treat hepatitis C. For this, the providers should make the appropriate referral to specialists (e.g., hepatologist, infectious disease physician) for monitoring of the liver and treatment when appropriate.

***Additional information.***

For additional information, go to:

[www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis)

<http://tn.gov/health/section/hepatitis>

[www.HCVAdvocate.org](http://www.HCVAdvocate.org)

***How many people in the U.S. are infected with Hepatitis C?***

3.2 million persons; this includes:

* 2.7 million (or ~1%) general population (civilian, non-institutionalized)
* 500,000 (15-35%) incarcerated population

***Why is it important to get tested?***

It is estimated that more than half of individuals living with HCV infection are unaware that they are infected. If you have HCV, there are ways to protect your liver, ways to prevent spreading HCV, and medications to cure HCV.

***Who is at risk for HCV?***

* IV drug users
* Tattoo/piercing recipients
* Blood/clotting protein recipients prior to 1992
* Mother-to-child transmission from HCV+ mother
* Hemodialysis patients
* People with HIV
* Occupational exposures
* Born between 1945-1965 (the “baby boomer” generation)

***What is the primary way that HCV is spread?***

Injection drug use (IDU) is the principle risk factor for HCV infection.

* HCV prevalence among persons who inject drugs (PWID) is between 30% - 70%
* HCV prevalence among younger (<30 yrs.) PWID is between 10% - 36%
* CV incidence among PWID is between 16% - 42% per year

***Why should Baby Boomers get tested?***

While anyone can get Hepatitis C, more than 75% of adults infected are Baby Boomers (people born from 1945 through 1965). However, only 2.6% of Baby Boomers are infected with HCV.

Baby boomers are five times more likely to have Hepatitis C than non-Baby Boomers.

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***Why do Baby Boomers have such high rates of HCV?***

The reason that baby boomers have high rates of Hepatitis C is not completely understood. Most boomers are believed to have become infected in the 1970s and 1980s when rates of Hepatitis C were the highest. Since people with Hepatitis C can live for decades without symptoms, many baby boomers are unknowingly living with an infection they got many years ago.

Hepatitis C is primarily spread through contact with blood from an infected person. Many baby boomers could have gotten infected from contaminated blood and blood products before widespread screening of the blood supply in 1992 and universal precautions were adopted. Others may have become infected from injecting drugs, even if only once in the past.

***Can a charitable organization set up a needle exchange?***

Such a program would require the standing order of a physician and dispensing by a pharmacist. Nothing in Tennessee Law prohibits the establishment of a needle exchange, provided that any needles are dispensed in accordance with Tennessee Law.  The organization would be required to engage in strict compliance with the foregoing requirements to

* Receive a prescription or an order prior to dispensing a syringe to any individual;
* Store all syringes in an area which is inaccessible to the public; and
* Engage a licensed provider to dispense any syringes. [[1]](#footnote-1)

***Must an individual have a prescription before obtaining a syringe?***

An individual seeking a syringe must have either:

* A prescription issued by a physician, physician’s assistant or advance practice nurse; or
* An order issued by a physician before a syringe may be lawfully dispensed to him or her.[[2]](#footnote-2)

***Who may dispense a syringe?***

A syringe may only be dispensed by:

* A physician;
* A physician’s assistant;
* An advance practice nurse;
* A pharmacist;
* A pharmacy intern or a pharmacy technician under the direct supervision of a pharmacist;

Additionally, a dispensing pharmacist may engage an agent (such as a delivery service) whose duty is to deliver that syringe to the patient after it has been dispensed.[[3]](#footnote-3)

***How must syringes be stored?***

An instrument or device intended for injection of any substance through the skin must be stored in an area not accessible to the public and dispensed only on proof of medical need.[[4]](#footnote-4)

***Does Tennessee have a criminal law concerning the dispensing of syringes?***

Yes.  T.C.A. 39-17-425 makes it unlawful to use, deliver or advertise a device intended to inject substances into the human body unless the device is lawfully ordered or prescribed.  An individual dispensing a syringe who is not a licensed provider as set forth above, or who is not in receipt of a prescription or physician’s order to dispense to a patient,  is in violation of this law and may be guilty of a class E felony.[[5]](#footnote-5)

***What is the authority of the Commissioner of Health with respect to outbreaks of communicable diseases?***

The Commissioner has the authority to investigate outbreaks of communicable disease and to take measures considered appropriate by medical experts for the protection of the public health.[[6]](#footnote-6)

***How long can HCV live outside of the body (e.g. equipment used with IDU)?***

* Up to 63 days in syringe barrel and dead space
* Up to 21 days in H2O in plastic container
* Up to 14 days on inanimate faces (cookers and injection surfaces)
* Up to 24 hours in filter; and 48 hours when foil-wrapped
* HCV-contaminated solution needs to be heated for almost a 90 seconds and reach temperatures of 144°F for infectivity to be at undetectable levels.

(Sources: Doerrbecker et al., *JID*, 2012; Doerrbecker et al.. *J ID,* 2011; Paintsil et al. *JID,* 2010\_

***If I am diagnosed with a positive Hepatitis C screening (antibody) test, does it mean that I have chronic Hepatitis C?***

Not necessarily – about one of four people with a history of HCV will clear the virus on their own, while about three of four will develop chronic infection.

***How do I know whether I have cleared the virus or have developed chronic infection?***

A second Hepatitis C test (called an RNA test) can determine if you do or do not have chronic infection?

***Where can I get a test for Hepatitis C?***

Most health providers (including many community health centers and health department clinics that provide primary care)

***What do I do if I have chronic infection?***

* About three of every four people with chronic HCV will develop chronic liver disease
* About one of every four people with chronic HCV will develop liver cirrhosis (irreversible scarring)
* About one out of every fifteen people with chronic HCV will die of cirrhosis or liver cancer

***How long does it take for cirrhosis to develop?***

For the people who develop cirrhosis, it may take up to 20 years to develop cirrhosis; however, certain conditions can accelerate the development of cirrhosis (like alcohol use, fatty liver, HAV, HBV, and/or HIV)

***What should I do if I am diagnosed with Hepatitis C?***

You should see your doctor and be evaluated for treatment

***Who needs treatment for HCV?***

Many considerations go into determining when (even if) someone should be treated for HCV. Some of these factors include:

* Stage of Disease
* Manifestations of Disease
* Likelihood of Progression
* Rate of Progression
* Patient Readiness

***What is Hepatitis C treatment like?***

Since 2013, there have been several newly introduced Hepatitis C medications that are easy to take (oral only, one time each day) with less side effects and significantly improved cure rates (approximately 90%)

While the exact regimen is determined by several factors, most treatment regimens are currently for ~12 weeks (typically ranging from eight to 24 weeks). The cost of the treatment is extremely high ($50,000 to $90,000 for a course of treatment).

1. *Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 39-17-425 (b)(1), 53-11-308; Tenn. Comp. R. & Regs., 1140-03-.12-(4).* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 39-17-425, 53-11-308, 63-6-204, 63-9-113; Tenn. Comp. R. & Regs., 1140-03-.12-(2).* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 63-10-204 (14), 63-19-107, 63- 7-126; Tenn. Comp. R. & Regs., 1140-03-.12-(3).* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Tenn. Comp. R. & Regs., 1140-03-.12-(4).* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Tenn. Code Ann. § 39-17-425 (a)(1).* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Tenn. Code Ann. § 68-1-104; Tenn. Comp. R. & Regs., 1200-14-1-.15(1).* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)