

# Hepatitis C Virus: What You Need to Know

Anyone can get infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV), the virus that causes hepatitis C. Hepatitis C is a liver infection that can lead to serious liver problems and possibly death.

Although most children and adolescents recover from the initial phase of HCV infection, 70% to 80% of acute infections become chronic. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about HCV symptoms, how HCV is spread, and ways to reduce the risk of an HCV infection.

## What are the symptoms of HCV infection?

People infected with HCV may have no or mild symptoms at first. People who have symptoms may experience one or more of the following:

- Flu-like symptoms (body aches, fever, diarrhea, or nausea)
- Extreme tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Dark yellow urine
- Light, clay-colored bowel movements
- Stomach pain, especially in the upper right side of the abdomen
- Jaundice (a yellowing of the eyes and skin)

Many babies and children show no symptoms. Some babies with HCV infection may have an enlarged liver or spleen, grow more slowly, or fail to gain weight.

If your child has some of the symptoms of HCV infection, contact your child's doctor. Let your child's doctor know if your child has been exposed to anyone with HCV. To diagnose HCV infection, your child's doctor will examine your child and test your child's blood for the virus.

## How is HCV spread?

Hepatitis C virus cannot be spread by touching, hugging, or kissing. Children with HCV infection can participate in all normal childhood activities and should not be excluded from child care centers or schools.

Hepatitis C virus can be spread through contact with blood or at childbirth. Hepatitis C virus can also be spread through sharing needles.

Most babies acquire HCV at birth from a mother who has HCV infection. The risk of acquiring infection is about 1 in 20 for a baby born to a mother with HCV infection.

## Can I prevent an HCV infection?

There currently is no vaccine for HCV infection. However, to reduce the risk of getting an HCV infection through contact with blood, do not share household items such as toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or other items that may contain small amounts of blood.

Also, because HCV can be spread through sexual contact, teens and adults with HCV infection should be strongly advised to avoid having sex. If they are going to have sex, they need to use latex condoms to prevent the spread of HCV. Anyone with HCV infection should also avoid drinking alcohol because alcohol can speed up liver damage.

## **What are the long-term effects of HCV infection?**

In some children, HCV infection can lead to persistent liver disease in the form of cirrhosis or scarring of the liver. Cirrhosis occurs when the liver cells die and are replaced by scar tissue and fat. Over time, the liver stops working and can no longer remove wastes from the body. Infants who develop cirrhosis of the liver because of chronic HCV infection may need a liver transplant to survive. Children infected with HCV also are at risk for developing other serious liver diseases, including liver cancer.

## **How is HCV infection treated?**

There are new drugs that can cure HCV infection in 95% to 98% of children 3 years and older.

## **For More Information**

American Academy of Pediatrics  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) and [www.HealthyChildren.org](http://www.HealthyChildren.org)

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