How can I find out if I have Hepatitis C?

If you think you're at risk for hepatitis C, you may want to get tested. There are two types of blood tests used to diagnose hepatitis C. The first test, called antibody test, looks for antibodies to hepatitis C; the second test (called qualitative PCR) looks for the virus itself. You can get tested for hepatitis C through any doctor. Antibody tests are also freely available at several DOH clinics and certain needle exchange programs.

If you have hepatitis C, there are a lot of things you can do to keep your liver healthy. Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B viruses. Hepatitis A in particular can be dangerous for people who already have hepatitis C. You may want to cut back on alcohol, since drinking alcohol greatly increases your risk of developing cirrhosis. Try to have a balanced diet, including some fresh fruits and vegetables once in a while. Certain vitamins and herbs may be helpful in strengthening your liver.

People with hepatitis C have medical options. There are tests used to monitor liver function, and tests to see whether the virus has done any damage to the liver. Some people with hepatitis C choose a treatment that combines two drugs – interferon and ribavirin. While this treatment has been effective for a lot of people, it can have serious side effects and doesn’t work for everyone. Also, some people with hepatitis C may not need treatment. To weigh your choices, talk to your doctor as well as friends and family, and look for other people with hepatitis C or support groups.

Needle Exchange Programs

New York City has needle exchange programs, where you can get new needles and other supplies (ties, bleach, cookers, cotton, etc).

The programs are free, anonymous, and legal. When you enroll, you get a card that makes it legal for you to possess needles.

Needle exchange programs operate at various locations throughout the city, during different times each day, including some weekend and evening hours.

We currently have needle exchange around:

- Lower East Side
- East Harlem
- Midtown, Upper West Side
- Bed Stuy & East New York
- Williamsburg, Bushwick
- South Bronx

To find an exchange in your neighborhood, call Harm Reduction Coalition at (212) 213-6376.

Many pharmacies in New York also sell syringes to people over 18, under a program called ESAP. When you go to an ESAP pharmacy, you don’t need a prescription to buy needles. To find an ESAP pharmacy near you, call 800-541-AIDS or 800-369-SIDA.

Produced by:
Hepatitis C Harm Reduction Project
http://www.hepcproject.org
a program of the Harm Reduction Coalition
22 West 27 Street
New York, NY 10001

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**What is Hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis is a general term for inflammation of the liver. Alcohol and drug use, prescription medications, chemicals and toxins, and autoimmunity (when the body’s immune system attacks itself) can all cause hepatitis.

Hepatitis C is a virus that can cause the liver to become inflamed. Hepatitis C is one of several different viruses that affect the liver. Right now, we know about hepatitis A, B, C, D, and E viruses.

Hepatitis C mainly infects liver cells, where the virus makes more copies of itself. These copies go on to infect other liver cells. When the immune system attacks the infected cells, the liver becomes inflamed. This process slowly damages the liver, and can sometimes lead to fibrosis, or cirrhosis — scarring of the liver.

About 4 million people in the US have been infected with hepatitis C. Most new cases are among people who inject drugs. Studies show that most people who have shot drugs have hepatitis C.

**What if I have Hepatitis C?**

A small group of people clear the hepatitis C virus from their body within a few months after becoming infected, but most people are chronically infected — meaning, the virus stays in your body for years.

Hepatitis C acts very slowly — most people won’t have any symptoms for 10 to 30 years after being infected. But, liver damage from Hepatitis C can happen more quickly if you also have HIV.

Most people with hepatitis C develop some liver damage over time, though it’s not always serious. Some people with hepatitis C may never experience liver damage. However, up to one in five people will develop serious scarring of the liver, called cirrhosis. A small percentage of people with cirrhosis develop liver cancer. Advanced liver disease can lead to liver failure, which is life-threatening.

**Transmission: Be Blood Aware**

Hepatitis C is transmitted through blood to blood contact: blood from one person with hepatitis C getting into another person’s body. Risks include:

- Sharing needles and other drug injection equipment (like cookers and cotton)
- Sexual activities that involve blood, such as anal sex or rough vaginal sex. Overall, the risk of sexual transmission is small for Hepatitis C.
- From mother to baby at birth (about 5% risk; much higher if the mother is also HIV+)
- Body piercing or tattooing using unsterilized needles or shared inkwells—primarily seen in jail settings.
- Possibly sharing things that may contain small traces of blood, like snorting straws, toothbrushes, razors, or manicure implements.

Hepatitis C can also be transmitted through sharing cookers or spoons, cotton and filters, and water. If you’re shooting up with someone else, make sure everyone’s using a clean needle, or else mix your shots in separate cookers using separate sources of water. Clean out used cookers and spoons. Keep in mind that hepatitis C can live in things that hold blood for several days outside of the body.

Sexual transmission of hepatitis C is uncommon. If you’re concerned about the risk of sexual transmission, use a condom and be sure to use ample lubrication during sex to reduce the risk of tearing/bleeding.

**Symptoms of Hepatitis C**

Most people don’t automatically feel sick when they first get infected with hepatitis C. That’s why people can have hepatitis C for decades without knowing it. Some people develop symptoms right away, but usually no symptoms appear until the liver is seriously damaged, ten to thirty years after infection.

Symptoms can include:

- weight loss
- low-grade fever
- headaches
- loss of appetite
- nausea
- stiff or aching joints
- pain in the right side, over the liver area
- dark brown urine; or pale feces
- fatigue and/or depression
- jaundice (the whites of the eyes and skin become yellowish)