# Table of contents

## Understanding hepatitis C

- Your liver and hepatitis C ................................................................. 1
- Hepatitis C by the numbers ............................................................... 1
- Diagnosing hepatitis C ................................................................. 1
- Hepatitis C genotypes ................................................................. 2
- Deciding when to start treatment .................................................. 2
- How hepatitis C is acquired ......................................................... 3
- How to avoid spreading hepatitis C to others .............................. 3
- Long-term effects of hepatitis C .................................................... 4
- Helping your liver heal ................................................................. 4

## Living with hepatitis C

- Healthy eating with hepatitis C ..................................................... 5
- Making healthy food choices ........................................................ 6
- Reaching and maintaining healthy weight ................................... 7
- Rest: An important part of successful treatment ......................... 8
- Exercise: Get moving ................................................................. 8
- Dealing with depression ............................................................. 9
- Everyday ways to boost your mood ............................................ 9
- Pregnancy and breastfeeding .................................................... 10

## To learn more

- Sources ....................................................................................... 11
- Resources ................................................................................... 12

---

This publication should be used for general educational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice. Although it is intended to be accurate, neither Walgreen Co., its subsidiaries or affiliates, nor any other party assumes liability for loss or damage due to reliance on this material. Advances in medicine may cause this information to become outdated, invalid or subject to debate. This information is not intended to create any warranty, and ALL SUCH WARRANTIES, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING ANY WARRANTY OF FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE, ARE HEREBY DISCLAIMED. If you are in need of immediate medical attention or have a medical question, contact your medical professional.

Inclusion of resources in this document does not imply endorsement by Walgreen Co. or any of its subsidiaries. These resources should be used for general information and educational purposes only.

Brand names are the property of their respective owners.
Tests. Doctor’s appointments. Medications you can’t yet pronounce. Being diagnosed with hepatitis C can be overwhelming. At a time when things feel out of control, remember that you can take an active role in your health—and your life. This booklet provides information that will help you understand and live with hepatitis C.

Your liver and hepatitis C

Your liver, shown in the picture below, helps digest food and convert it into energy. It also breaks down substances like alcohol, caffeine, and prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications. And your liver helps in blood clotting and many other important body functions.

Hepatitis C is a virus that causes swelling of the liver. It is the most common liver disease. Some types of hepatitis, including hepatitis A and B, can be prevented by vaccination, but there is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C by the numbers

2.7–3.9 million  
People living with hepatitis C in the United States

17,000  
People who are diagnosed with hepatitis C in the United States each year

12,000  
Deaths caused by hepatitis C in the United States each year

Diagnosing hepatitis C

Because hepatitis C can infect a person many years before it’s discovered, it is often called a silent disease. Most people don’t experience any symptoms after they become infected with hepatitis C. Those who do may notice fatigue (extreme tiredness), muscle aches, and abdominal (stomach) pain. Even if you have no symptoms, the virus can still damage your liver.

When you were diagnosed, your doctor may have performed blood tests to detect the hepatitis C virus or the antibodies that your body produces to fight the virus. Hepatitis C blood tests may have been recommended based on your health history, unexplained symptoms, a history of piercings or tattoos, or abnormal liver enzymes or liver function tests found during routine blood testing. Sometimes, hepatitis C is found during a screening that is done if you seek to donate blood. The virus can’t be detected in the blood until two to eight weeks after a person becomes infected. People with hepatitis C are not permitted to be blood donors.
Blood tests can show whether you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus at some time in your life, or if the virus is active in your body at the time of the test. Blood tests can also show whether you have chronic (long-term) hepatitis C. Having chronic hepatitis C means you may someday develop health problems as a result of the virus.

**Hepatitis C genotypes**

Not all hepatitis C viruses are exactly the same. The different types are called genotypes. Your genotype will not change throughout your illness. Currently, there are six known genotypes, which can be determined by a blood test. About three out of four people in the United States who have hepatitis C are infected with genotype 1. Most of the others have genotype 2 or 3.

It is important to know what genotype you have. Your genotype will affect how long your treatment will last. Some genotypes respond better to treatment than others. Doctors prefer not to use the word “cure,” but if treatment is successful, health risks from hepatitis C can be reduced dramatically. With successful treatment, the virus goes from being detectable in your blood to NOT being detectable in your blood.

Genotype testing does not show how much your liver has been damaged by hepatitis C.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genotype</th>
<th>Percentage who clear virus</th>
<th>Duration of treatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Up to 86%</td>
<td>24–48 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or 3</td>
<td>65–80%</td>
<td>24 weeks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Deciding when to start treatment**

In the past, hepatitis C was often not treated in the early stages. Instead, doctors waited to see if the person’s body would rid itself of the virus on its own. Recent studies have shown that there are advantages to treating the disease early. Even so, some people are still advised to delay treatment, which is known as watchful waiting.

Because your doctor has suggested you receive treatment now, it means that you have a good chance of responding to medication. It also means your doctor trusts you to take your medication as directed and ask for help in managing your medications. Never stop taking your medications without checking with your doctor first.

In some cases, untreated hepatitis C infection can lead to liver scarring and other serious health problems. It is hard to predict who will develop health problems due to hepatitis C. Many people never do. The good news is that lifestyle changes and medications can help keep the infection from getting worse and prevent damage to your liver.
How hepatitis C is acquired

Hepatitis C is usually spread through direct contact with infected blood. This can happen by getting tattoos or body piercings with contaminated instruments. Hepatitis C may also be transmitted by sharing needles to inject illegal drugs. In fact, most people are infected with hepatitis C within one year after starting to share needles.

Hepatitis C can be acquired by having unprotected sex with an infected partner. The virus is transmitted through contact with blood or body fluids such as semen and vaginal secretions. If you are having unprotected sex with one exclusive partner, the risk of spreading hepatitis C is low. However, if you are having unprotected sex with more than one partner, the risk of spreading the virus is much higher. You should use latex condoms correctly and use them every time to reduce the risk of spreading hepatitis C and other sexually transmitted diseases. Using latex condoms doesn’t guarantee that your partner won’t get hepatitis C but it can provide some protection.

How to avoid spreading hepatitis C to others

If you are infected with hepatitis C, it’s important to avoid spreading the disease to others. Avoid being exposed to hepatitis C again since you could acquire a different strain of the disease. Here’s how:

- Always wash your hands with soap and water after touching your blood or body fluids.
- Make sure personal care items (such as used tissues, bandages, and tampons) are discarded in a plastic bag.
- If you are having sex with more than one partner, use latex condoms every time.
- Don’t share toothbrushes, razors, needles, syringes, nail clippers, scissors or body-piercing instruments.
- Cover all sores and rashes and avoid touching them.
- Do not donate blood, plasma, body organs, tissue, eggs or sperm.

You should also know that you cannot spread hepatitis C to another person (or acquire it yourself) by:

- Holding a person’s hand
- Hugging or kissing
- Coughing or sneezing
- Sharing eating utensils (such as spoons and forks) or drinking glasses
**Long-term effects of hepatitis C**

Your liver has a wonderful ability to heal itself. But sometimes, severe damage can’t be reversed. Anything that injures your liver over many years causes it to form scar tissue, which is called fibrosis. Scar tissue cannot do any of the things that normal liver tissue can do. When fibrosis becomes so severe that it interferes with your liver’s ability to work properly, it’s called cirrhosis. Having hepatitis C for a long time (20 years to 30 years) raises your risk of cirrhosis.

Some people live with cirrhosis for five, 10 or 20 years, yet don’t feel severe symptoms. However, cirrhosis can cause serious problems, ranging from severe fatigue and difficulty thinking clearly to ascites, a fluid build-up in the stomach area. Ascites causes a quick and noticeable weight gain. Check your weight daily and contact your doctor if you have a gain of more than 10 pounds (or greater than two pounds per day for three days in a row).

Some people will eventually need a liver transplant because their liver is so damaged. A liver transplant is an operation to remove a damaged liver and replace it with a healthy one. Many people who have had a liver transplant lead normal, active lives. Because of the long waiting period for a liver transplant and the limited availability of donor livers, your doctor may start discussing this option with you long before you actually need it.

**Helping your liver heal**

How you take care of yourself and your liver now plays an important role in how quickly hepatitis C progresses. You can help your liver heal by:

- Taking your medications exactly as your doctor prescribes
- Eating well
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Avoiding substances that can harm your liver, like alcohol and illegal drugs
Living with hepatitis C

Taking your medication exactly as your doctor prescribed is the key to successful treatment. A separate booklet, Understanding Your Hepatitis C Medications, is provided to help you manage medication side effects.

You may be wondering what you can do, in addition to taking medication, to take care of yourself while you are receiving treatment for hepatitis C. One important step you can take is to ask your doctor about being vaccinated against hepatitis A and B. Eating healthy, getting enough rest and exercising are also important to your recovery.

Healthy eating with hepatitis C

Most people who are living with hepatitis C don’t need to follow a special diet. Just trying to eat healthy and maintaining a healthy weight is all that’s needed. Here are some tips for safe and healthy eating:

- Think small. Instead of three main meals, try eating smaller meals or snacks at least every three to four hours.
- Cook your food. Do not eat raw or undercooked fish, such as sushi. All shellfish such as clams or shrimp must also be cooked thoroughly to prevent food-borne illnesses, like hepatitis A.
- Drink lots of fluids, as this can help decrease side effects. Aim for at least eight to 10 glasses of water or clear caffeine-free fluids a day, including clear juices.
- Avoid alcohol. Hepatitis C can damage the liver, weakening its ability to break down alcohol.
  - Drinking too much alcohol can lead to cirrhosis, advanced liver disease, or even liver cancer.
  - Alcohol can interfere with your hepatitis C medications so that they don’t work properly.
  - There is no evidence that any level of alcohol is safe for people with hepatitis C. The best advice is to avoid alcohol completely.
- Ask your doctor about dietary supplements.
  - The best way to get vitamins and minerals is through food. However, a multivitamin and mineral supplement can be helpful, especially if your appetite is poor.
  - Before taking any supplement, talk with your doctor. If supplements are suggested, don’t take more than your doctor recommends.
Making healthy food choices
Follow the suggestions for choosing healthy foods shown below to reach and maintain a healthy weight.

You can also ask your doctor to refer you to a dietitian, who can create a meal plan to help you reach a healthier weight.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foods to enjoy often</th>
<th>Tips for healthy eating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Fruits               | • Try to eat five servings a day of fresh, frozen or canned fruit.  
                      • Buy fruits that are in season, when they are often affordable and at their peak flavor.  
                      • Use a blender to make a fruit smoothie. |
| Vegetables           | • Choose vegetables that are easy to prepare.  
                      • Pick up prewashed bags of salad greens and add cherry tomatoes for a quick salad.  
                      • Stock up on packages of baby carrots or celery sticks for easy snacks. |
| Lean meats, fish, dried beans and eggs | • Choose these foods as good sources of protein to help your body fight infection.  
                      • Keep nuts and hard-boiled eggs on hand for a quick, nutritious snack.  
                      • Boil, bake or stir-fry foods instead of frying. |
| Dairy products       | • Select low-fat or fat-free milk, cheese and yogurt.  
                      • Choose dairy-based snacks such as light string cheese or fruit smoothies made with milk. |
| “Good” fats (unsaturated) | • Know that flaxseed, canola and soybean oil are high in unsaturated fat, which is healthier for your heart than other types of fat.  
                      • Eat cold-water fish like tuna, salmon and mackerel.  
                      • Add nuts or seeds to other foods for a healthy crunch.  
                      • Use fats sparingly because all fats are high in calories. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foods to limit or avoid</th>
<th>Tips for healthy eating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Salt                    | • Try sprinkling your food with herbs and other seasonings instead of salt.  
                      • Keep in mind that processed foods such as crackers, chips and canned soups are high in salt.  
                      • Reduce the amount of salt in your diet to help stay at a healthy weight and keep your blood pressure at a healthy level.  
                      • Read food labels to know which foods are high in salt. |
| Sugar                   | • Go easy on sugary foods and drinks because they tend to be high in calories and low on nutrition.  
                      • Keep in mind that eating too many sweets means you won’t have room for healthier foods. |
| “Bad” fats (saturated and trans fats) | • Know that animal products such as cheese, butter, whole milk, ice cream, cream and fatty meats (including beef, sausage, bologna and hot dogs) are high in saturated fats.  
                      • Keep in mind that coconut, palm and palm kernel oil are high in saturated fat.  
                      • Try to resist fried foods, commercially prepared baked goods, candy and pastries, which are high in trans fat. |
Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight

To find out if your weight is at a healthy level, you should know your body mass index (BMI). You can find your BMI by using a chart such as the one available online from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (http://nhlbisupport.com/bmi/). Type in your height and weight, and your BMI value will be calculated for you. If you don’t have Internet access, your doctor can tell you your BMI.

A BMI below 18 means your weight may be too low for your height. If your BMI is between 18.5 and 24.9, your weight is considered normal. A BMI of 25 or more means you may need to lose weight.

Some people with hepatitis C may have a hard time keeping their weight up. Hepatitis C medications can cause side effects that make it hard to eat, such as loss of appetite, a bad taste in your mouth, dry mouth, sore mouth and sore throat, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea. Information about managing medication side effects is provided in a separate booklet, Understanding Your Hepatitis C Medications.

Other people with hepatitis C may struggle to keep their weight down. Being overweight is linked to the buildup of fat in the liver. This is called “fatty liver.” Fatty liver can make it harder for your hepatitis C medications to work. If you have cirrhosis, talk to your doctor about your diet. You may need to limit certain foods, such as salt, to prevent swelling in your legs or belly.
Rest: An important part of successful treatment

Your body needs rest to heal and repair itself. Rest is even more important when you are taking hepatitis C medications. Exercise will help strengthen your body and rest gives you time to recharge. These tips may help you meet your need for added rest:

- Pace yourself. Make sure all your tasks are worth your time and effort. Take your time in performing them. Try not to schedule too many activities in one day.
- Plan your activities. If you are going to shop, prepare a list in the order you’ll find the items in the store or mall to minimize your steps and decrease the amount of time you will be on your feet.
- Sleep. Always try to get a full night of sleep. If that doesn’t seem like enough, ask your doctor whether daytime naps are recommended.
- Reduce stress. Try to schedule some time each day for relaxation and quiet activities, such as reading or watching television. A stress management program, relaxation training or a support group may help.
- Avoid large meals. Instead of eating three large meals, try to eat smaller meals more often throughout the day. You’ll feel more comfortable and find it easier to sleep at night.
- Don’t do too much. Set realistic expectations of what you can do each day. Overdoing it will make you more tired.

Exercise: Get moving

Both hepatitis C and the medications for treating it can cause you to feel tired. Although exercise may seem unappealing when you are tired, once you get started, it can boost your energy level. It can also help you cope with your condition and manage your weight.

Try to exercise regularly. You might choose to do any of the following activities:

- Cycling
- Low-impact aerobics
- Swimming
- Walking
- Weight training
The type of activity you choose will depend on your fitness level, how your body reacts to exercise, and what activities you enjoy. And remember to take it slowly at first. You may want to meet with an exercise professional who has experience working with people who have hepatitis C. Always check with your doctor before starting an exercise program.

Dealing with depression

It is common to feel depressed when you first receive a diagnosis of a condition such as hepatitis C. These feelings usually pass as you adjust to the news. It is important to know that medications used to treat hepatitis C also can cause depression.

Symptoms of depression may include some or all of the following:

- Feeling sad, empty or anxious most of the time
- Losing interest or pleasure in activities that you previously enjoyed
- Being tired or lacking energy
- Feeling restless or irritable
- Eating too much or too little
- Having difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feeling worthless, helpless or guilty
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Thinking about death or suicide

If you have thoughts of suicide, you should call 911 or your local emergency services number. If you don’t want to do that, contact a doctor, mental health professional, crisis center or hotline.

If you think you may be depressed, talk with your doctor. Your doctor may recommend counseling (also called psychotherapy), antidepressant medications, or a combination of both. Counseling involves talking with a mental health professional, or therapist, about your thoughts and feelings.

Antidepressant medications help correct imbalances in brain chemicals. It can take several months before you start experiencing the full benefits of antidepressants. However, you may notice side effects sooner. Side effects of antidepressants may include headache, nausea, diarrhea, constipation and lack of sex drive. Talk with your doctor if your depression does not improve. Your medication dose may need to be adjusted or you might need to try a different antidepressant.

Everyday ways to boost your mood

- Get enough sleep. Try to go to bed and get up at the same times every day.
- Reduce stress. Try stress management techniques such as yoga or meditation.
- Keep a journal and write about your feelings, positive and negative.
- Exercise regularly, choosing activities that you enjoy.
- Talk about how you feel. Family, friends and hepatitis C support groups can all be sources of help.
Pregnancy and breastfeeding

One of the medications used to treat hepatitis C (ribavirin) can cause severe birth defects. This is true whether it is the man or woman being treated with ribavirin. If either partner is taking ribavirin, the couple must use two effective forms of birth control to avoid pregnancy. For example, the man uses a condom, and the woman uses a diaphragm. You must keep using two effective forms of birth control during the entire time that either partner is taking ribavirin and for six months after the last dose.

Additionally, if a female patient is being treated with either IncivekTM or VictrelisTM, it is important to know that these medications can make hormonal birth control less effective. As with ribavirin, if either partner is taking one of these medications, the couple must use two effective forms of birth control to avoid pregnancy, for example, a condom with spermicidal jelly and a diaphragm. Hormonal contraception, such as birth control pills and vaginal rings, may not work as well during and after treatment with Incivek or Victrelis, so check with your doctor or pharmacist for alternative methods.

You may be reassured to know that it is rare for a pregnant woman with hepatitis C to infect her baby. Only 1 percent to 5 percent of babies born to women with hepatitis C acquire the virus, and it makes no difference whether the newborns are delivered vaginally or by Caesarean section. A man with hepatitis C can’t pass the virus to the unborn baby at all.

Women who are taking medication for hepatitis C must not breastfeed. Women with hepatitis C who are not taking medication for this condition should talk to their doctors if they are thinking about breastfeeding; it is usually considered safe.
To learn more

The more informed you are, the better you can manage your health. Our specialty pharmacy Hepatitis C Care Team provides personalized, supportive and dependable care to help you achieve the best results from your prescribed therapy.

Sources

The following sources were used in the development of this booklet and the companion piece, Understanding Your Hepatitis C Medications.


**Resources**

**American Liver Foundation (ALF)**
www.liverfoundation.org
212-668-1000

The ALF is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to the prevention, treatment, and cure of hepatitis and other liver diseases. The web site features a database directory of hepatitis clinical trials, fact sheets, and links to additional resources.

**Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**
www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/c/index.htm
800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)

The CDC is a United States federal agency that falls under the Department of Health and Human Services. The CDC works in collaboration with state health departments and other organizations to create educational programs in health promotion, prevention of disease, injury and disability, and preparedness for new health threats. These programs are created for the American public to use in order to project their health. The CDC’s Division of Viral Hepatitis is one program of many that includes a directory of hepatitis clinical trials, fact sheets and links to additional resources.

**Hepatitis Foundation International (HFI)**
www.hepfi.org
800-891-0707

This nonprofit organization offers contact information for hepatitis support groups, education on all types of hepatitis through online learning and training programs, and downloadable fact sheets, brochures, booklets, and videos to help people manage their health condition and encourage liver wellness.

**U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**
National Hepatitis C Program
www.hepatitis.va.gov
877-222-VETS (877-222-8387)

The VA is the largest single provider of medical care to people with hepatitis C in the United States. Its web site offers consumer-friendly information, including printable fact sheets, treatment charts, and materials designed to help people with hepatitis C keep track of doctors’ appointments, test results, medication schedules, and side effects.