



# Patient education: Hepatitis C (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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## What is hepatitis C?

This is a disease that harms the liver. The liver is a big organ in the upper right side of the belly ( [figure 1](#)). A virus causes hepatitis C. The virus is called the hepatitis C virus. It spreads from person to person through contact with blood. This can happen in a few ways, including sharing drug needles.

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## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Feeling tired or weak
- Not feeling hungry
- Nausea
- Muscle or joint aches
- Weight loss

In most cases, hepatitis C lasts for many years. That can lead to liver scarring, called "cirrhosis." Many people with cirrhosis have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Swelling in the belly and legs, and fluid buildup in the lungs
- Bruising or bleeding easily
- Trouble taking in a full breath
- Feeling full in the belly
- Yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes, called jaundice
- Confusion that can start suddenly
- Coma

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## How is hepatitis C spread?

You can catch the hepatitis C virus if you have contact with the blood of someone who is infected. This can happen if you:

- Use injection drugs and share needles, syringes, and other items (this is the most common way to get hepatitis C)
- Use drugs through the nose, and share straws
- Use infected needles for tattooing, acupuncture, or piercings
- Share toothbrushes, razors, or other things that could have blood on them
- Got a blood transfusion in the US before 1990 (after that time, blood banks started testing donated blood for the hepatitis C virus)

It is also possible for the hepatitis C virus to spread in other ways:

- You can catch the virus if you have sex with someone who is infected. But this does not happen very often.
- A pregnant person who is infected can give hepatitis C to their baby.

Some people who have hepatitis C do not remember how they were infected. In the US, experts recommend that all people older than 18 years get tested at least once for hepatitis C. Your doctor might want to test you for hepatitis C, even if you have not done any of the things that put you at risk for infection.

The hepatitis C virus is **not** spread through kissing, hugging, or casual contact. It is also not spread through coughing, sneezing, or sharing food or utensils.

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## Is there a test for hepatitis C?

Yes. Your doctor might order a few tests:

- Blood tests can show:
  - If you have hepatitis C
  - What type of the virus you have (there are at least 6 types)

If you have hepatitis C, your doctor will also want to know if you have any liver scarring. Ways to check for scarring include:

- Blood tests
- Liver scan – This is an imaging test that can show how much scarring you have. Not all doctors have access to the machine that does the scan.

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## How is hepatitis C treated?

There are different medicines to treat it. You will have to take a combination of 2 or more medicines. The medicines come as pills. Treatment usually lasts 2 to 3 months, depending on which combination you use. Some combinations only work on certain types of the hepatitis C virus.

Your doctor will help you decide which medicines are right for you.

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## How can I protect my liver?

You can:

- Avoid alcohol.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet, and maintain a healthy weight.
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B.
- Get vaccinated for pneumonia, the flu, COVID-19, and other diseases.
- Ask your doctor or nurse before taking any over-the-counter pain medicines. (These can sometimes damage the liver.)

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## What if I want to get pregnant?

Talk to your doctor or nurse before you start trying. About 1 in 20 pregnant people who have hepatitis C pass the virus on to their baby during pregnancy. This number is higher in people who also have HIV infection.

If you have hepatitis C, it is safe to breastfeed.

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## What will my life be like?

Many people with hepatitis C can live normal lives. Treatment can cure the disease in almost all cases.

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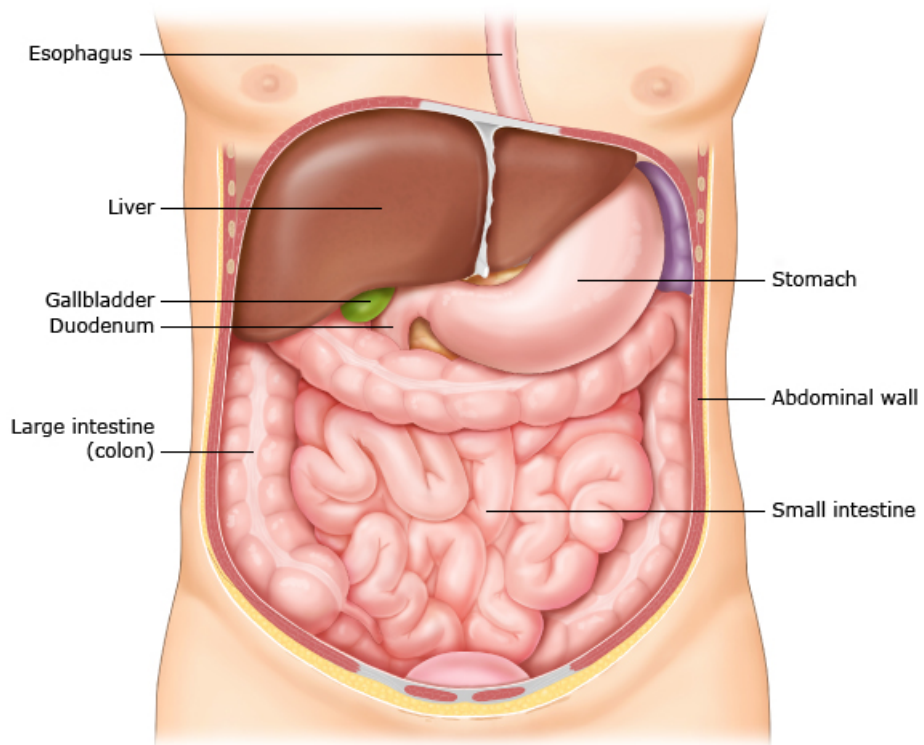
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## GRAPHICS

### Organs inside the abdomen (belly)



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