

# HEPATITIS C and Incarceration



## Is Hepatitis C a health problem for people who have been incarcerated?

Yes. Of the 2.2 million people in U.S. jails and prisons, about 1 in 3 of them have Hepatitis C.

## Why are adults in correctional facilities at risk for Hepatitis C?

Many people who enter jails or prisons have Hepatitis C. The most common way inmates get Hepatitis C is by sharing equipment used for injecting drugs, tattooing, and piercing with other people who are already infected. The virus can be spread easily to others through blood, even in very small amounts too small to see.

## What happens if a person has Hepatitis C?

It depends on many things, including a person's age, health, and use of drugs or alcohol. Some people have health problems within a few years of getting infected. Other people live with Hepatitis C for 20 or 30 years without serious health problems. But, over time, the virus can hurt the liver.

## What is hepatitis?

"Hepatitis" means inflammation or swelling of the liver. The liver is an important organ that helps the body digest food, clean blood, and fight germs. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, it does not work very well.

Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. There are three common types of viral hepatitis: Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C. They are all different from each other and are spread from one person to another in different ways. Hepatitis C is the most common type of hepatitis in the United States. It is also the most common type in jails and prisons.

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an illness that is caused by the Hepatitis C virus. When a person **first** gets the Hepatitis C virus, many different things can happen.

- Many people have the virus and don't even know it because they don't feel sick.
- Some people have the virus and feel a little sick.
- Few people have the virus and feel very sick.

After a person gets Hepatitis C, a person's body can sometimes **fight** the virus and get better, but this does not happen very often. If a person gets rid of or clears the virus, it usually happens within 6 months. For most people who get Hepatitis C, the virus stays in their body for life. Doctors call this chronic Hepatitis C.

## How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is most often spread when blood from a person who has Hepatitis C enters the body of someone who is not infected. Here are common ways someone can get Hepatitis C.

- **Blood:** The Hepatitis C virus can be in blood spills, droplets, and blood splatters outside the body. The virus can also survive in dried blood for several days. Whenever contact is made with surfaces, equipment, or objects that have infected blood on them—even in amounts too small to see—the virus can be spread to others.
- **Drugs:** Most people get the Hepatitis C virus from an infected person when sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs. Even the tiniest amount of blood on needles and other types of drug equipment can spread Hepatitis C from one person to another.



- **Tattoos/Piercing/Scarring:** The Hepatitis C virus and other diseases can be spread when tattoo, piercing, or cutting equipment has tiny amounts of blood on it. Many people get tattoos, piercings, or other marks while incarcerated. When they share the equipment, it is easy for people to spread the virus and become infected with Hepatitis C.
- **Sex:** The Hepatitis C virus can be spread through sex, although this does not happen very often. The virus seems to be more easily spread through sex when a person also has HIV or an STD. People who have rough sex or many sex partners seem to get Hepatitis C more often.



## What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Many people with Hepatitis C have no symptoms and do not know they are infected. If a person has symptoms, they can include one or more of these signs:

- Fever
- Feeling very tired
- Not wanting to eat
- Upset stomach
- Throwing up
- Stomach pain
- Dark urine
- Grey colored stool
- Bone or joint pain
- Yellow skin and eyes

## How can you tell if a person has Hepatitis C?

You cannot tell if a person has Hepatitis C by looking at them. Doctors use blood tests and a medical exam to see if a person has Hepatitis C.

## Can Hepatitis C be prevented?

Yes. To prevent Hepatitis C:

- Do not use tattooing, piercing, or cutting equipment that has been used on someone else. This includes such things as sharp objects, ink, needles, or barrels that could have even tiny amounts of blood on them that are too small to see
- Do not share needles or other equipment, including cookers, cottons, ties, or water, to inject drugs
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or other personal items that may have come into contact with another person's blood

## Why doesn't cleaning kill the Hepatitis C virus?

Bleaching, boiling, burning, or using common cleaning fluids, alcohol, or peroxide will **not** clean needles, tools, and other instruments. These methods are not strong enough to kill the Hepatitis C virus. The virus can still spread easily from one person to another.

## Is there a test for Hepatitis C?

Yes. Doctors use blood tests to find out if a person has Hepatitis C. The first blood test looks for "antibodies," or signs in a person's blood that they have been exposed to the Hepatitis C virus. If the test is positive for Hepatitis C antibodies, a different test is needed. This second test will tell if the Hepatitis C virus is still in the body. If this test is positive, the person most likely has lifelong, or chronic, Hepatitis C. Additional tests and a medical exam are needed to confirm the diagnosis

## Can Hepatitis C be treated?

Yes, but the treatment for Hepatitis C depends on many different things. Not everyone needs to get medical treatment. Often the virus stays in a person's body and does not cause problems. That's why it is important for a person who has Hepatitis C to get regular check-ups, if possible. A doctor will run tests to see if the virus is causing damage to the liver. If the liver is damaged, medicines called "antivirals" can sometimes help. These medicines can make people feel better, slow damage to the liver, and get rid of the virus.

## What can people infected with Hepatitis C do to take care of their liver?

People with chronic Hepatitis C should not use alcohol or street drugs. They can hurt the liver. Some other products can also hurt people with Hepatitis C, even if they appear to be safe. Check with medical staff before taking any kind of pill, vitamin, herbal product, or medicine.

## For more information

Talk to medical staff or your doctor, or have your loved ones talk to a doctor, clinic, or health department. Information on Hepatitis C can be found at: [www.cdc.gov/hepatitis](http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis)



U.S. Department of  
Health and Human Services  
Centers for Disease  
Control and Prevention



PROMOTE PROTECT PROSPER  
South Carolina Department of Health  
and Environmental Control