

HEP C OVERVIEW

Get the facts you need to stay healthy and hep C free.

WHAT IS HEP C?

- Hepatitis C (hep C) is a virus that attacks the liver.
- While there are vaccines for hepatitis A and B, there is **no vaccine** for hep C.
- People with hep C may feel healthy for many years, but over time it can cause liver damage, cancer, and even death.
- With proper treatment, **hep C can be cured**.
- Millions of people in the U.S. have hep C, and because there are often no symptoms, most won't know they have it for many years.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF?

Although there is no vaccine to prevent hep C, there are ways to reduce the risk of becoming infected:

- If you inject drugs, only **use new needles, syringes, and works every time**. You can get needles and syringes at your local syringe service program (**SSP**), sometimes referred to as "needle exchange". To find a syringe service provider, visit: mass.gov/HepC. In Massachusetts, you can also buy needles and syringes at local pharmacies.
- To get information about substance use treatment, visit HelplineMA.org.
- Only get tattoos or body piercings at licensed places that use sterile equipment and supplies.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or nail clippers.
- Use a condom for anal or vaginal sex.
- Get tested regularly and get treatment if you test positive. Find a testing location near you at mass.gov/HepCTesting.

HEP C IS SPREAD...

By contact with blood from an infected person.

This can happen through:

- Sharing needles, syringes, cookers, cottons, mixing water, and other drug equipment, when injecting drugs.
- Transmission from pregnant people with hep C to their children before or during birth.
- Having sex with a person who is infected with hep C.
- Getting a tattoo or piercing in unlicensed places or with non-sterile equipment.
- Sharing items like toothbrushes, nail clippers, or razors that may have blood on them.

HEP C IS NOT SPREAD...

- Through sneezing, hugging, holding hands, coughing, sharing utensils or drinking glasses, or through food or water.

WHY AND HOW SHOULD I GET TESTED FOR HEP C?

Hep C symptoms aren't always clear, and the only way to know for sure if you have it is to **get tested**.

Everyone 18 years of age and older should get tested **at least once** in their lifetime, but more frequently if they are pregnant or engage in higher-risk behaviors. Talk to your healthcare provider to make a plan for when to get tested.

Hep C goes undiagnosed because it often doesn't cause symptoms. When signs and symptoms are present, they may include one or more of the following: yellowing of the skin and eyes, loss of appetite, upset stomach, fever and muscle aches, dark urine, light-colored stool, joint pain, and feeling tired. Symptoms usually appear between two weeks and three months after exposure. The only way to know if you have hep C is to get tested.

There are two tests that are used to find out if you have a hep C infection.

- The first one is a blood test used to determine if you have antibodies in your blood (**antibody test**).
- If that is positive, then you should get another blood test that looks for the virus (**RNA test**). If this test is positive, that tells you that you have a hep C infection. The RNA test may be done automatically if the antibody test is positive but ask your healthcare provider to be sure.

Find a testing location near you at mass.gov/HepCTesting.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I GET TESTED?

- If your result is negative, you do not have hep C. If you are a person that injects drugs and shares needles or works, it is important to test regularly as recommended by your healthcare provider.
- If you test positive you will need to follow up with a healthcare provider since starting treatment right away can cure your hep C infection and keep you healthy.

IS THERE A CURE FOR HEP C?

- Yes, current treatments usually involve just **8–12 weeks** of medication (oral tablet) and cure **over 90%** of people with few side effects.
- You can get infected again even if you've been successfully treated and cured, so it is important to protect yourself.

HOW CAN I STAY HEALTHY MENTALLY AND EMOTIONALLY?

- Mental health is an important component of your whole health. If you have hep C infection, it may be helpful to get support for what you are going through.
- Ask your healthcare provider about mental health resources and support groups that can help get you the care you need.

➤➤➤➤ Visit mass.gov/HepC ◀◀◀◀
for more information and to find a provider that can help.

