

LIVING WITH HEPATITIS C

HCV infection is not a “death sentence.” Most persons are able to live full, happy, and healthy lives. Health care providers recommend persons living with HCV:

- Not drink alcohol
- Avoid crash diets and/or binges
- Eat a variety of healthy foods
- Not take vitamins or mineral supplements without consulting a physician
- Drink 8-12 full glasses of water a day
- Learn about hepatitis C and communicate with their health care provider

It may also be important to educate your family and friends of your HCV infection. Educating them about the transmission of HCV can be helpful in avoiding transmission to others, as well as providing support for you.

Learning of your HCV diagnosis can impact your emotional health as well. It is completely normal to have strong feelings such as fear, anger, sadness, and helplessness. Some things to keep in mind about your feelings are:

- No matter what you are feeling, you have a right to feel that way
- There are no “wrong” or “right” feelings—they are what they are
- Feelings come and go
- You have choices about how you respond to your feelings

Learning to deal with stress can also help you live happily with HCV.

- Try physical activity. When you feel anxious, sad, or angry try walking, gardening, or any other form of physical activity to relieve your tension.
- Take care of yourself. Make sure to get an adequate amount of rest and eat well. If you are irritable from lack of sleep or are not eating well you will have less energy to deal with stressful situations appropriately.
- Talk about it. If you do not feel comfortable voicing your concerns with family members or friends contact a VA health care provider or counselor.
- Learn relaxation techniques such as yoga, meditation, or deep breathing.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention

888-4-HEP-CDC (443-7232)
www.cdc.gov/hepatitis

VA National Hepatitis C Program

<http://hepatitis.va.gov>

Veterans Linkage Line

888-LinkVet (546-5838)
www.minnesotaveteran.org

American Liver Foundation

800-GO-LIVER (465-4837)
www.liverfoundation.org

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WHAT VETERANS NEED TO KNOW ABOUT HEPATITIS C VIRUS

Hepatitis C is one of three types of viral hepatitis that cause inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C are the most common types of the virus seen in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that almost 4 million Americans have been infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV).

HCV is spread by contact with the blood of a person who is infected.

WHO IS AT RISK?

- Injection drug users (even if only a one time occurrence).
- Persons treated for clotting problems with a blood product made before 1987.
- Persons who received a blood transfusion or solid organ transplant prior to July 1992.
- Persons ever on long-term kidney dialysis.

While 80% of persons infected with HCV have no signs or symptoms, some do experience flu-like symptoms including:

- Jaundice
- Fatigue
- Abdominal pain
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Joint and muscle pain
- Fever

As this disease progresses the liver may become enlarged and tender causing additional symptoms such as:

- Chills
- Weight loss
- Distaste for cigarettes and food
- Dark urine and light stools

MN Department of Veterans Affairs, MN Department of Health
VA Medical Center-Minneapolis, American Liver Foundation



WHY ARE VETERANS AT AN INCREASED RISK?

Studies estimate that veterans may be at an increased risk of infection due to behavioral risk. Some studies indicate the infection rate among veterans is three times higher than the general population.

Highest rates of infection were found among veterans who:

- reported having used injection drugs
- served in the Vietnam era
- had ever been in jail for more than 48 hours
- received tattoos from unlicensed tattoo parlors or got their tattoos before HCV was identified.

No link has been found between HCV infection and military-related factors such as history of combat duty, exposure to blood during combat, or being wounded in combat.

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Art

ART JOINED THE MARINE CORPS right after high school in 1966. He went to Vietnam in 1968 where he served for four years in the 5th recon of the Marine Corps. During that time he was wounded and received a blood transfusion. After his service, Art worked as a carpenter for 30 years. Three years ago, Art was diagnosed with hepatitis C, likely due to the blood transfusion during Vietnam.

At the time of his diagnosis, Art did not know anything about hepatitis C and didn't feel sick, but he started reading about the disease to help protect those around him. He was concerned that during his carpentry career his co-workers may have been exposed to hepatitis C by coming in contact with his blood when he cut himself on the job. Art has received his hepatitis C care through the VA hospital and is very pleased with how he is treated.

"I thought I was just another number walking through the door, but it's really like going to a family reunion. They know your face, they know your name, and they are genuinely concerned about you."

Art has one daughter and two grandchildren that he enjoys spending time with. Motorcycles are one of Art's favorite hobbies. He has four Harley Davidson motorcycles that he enjoys riding when he goes on fishing trips.

Dennis and Charla



"Get tested. Knowing your status can help protect your family."

DENNIS IS A U.S. ARMY VETERAN who served in the 101st Airborne Division of the Army Infantry. He was in Vietnam for two years. He and his wife, Charla, have been married for 33 years and are both recovering drug users.

During a routine physical exam, Dennis' doctor requested that he be tested for hepatitis C because of his tattoos and past drug use. The results were positive for hepatitis C. Dennis attributes this to his history of injecting drug use. Charla and their children were all tested, with negative results.

Dennis received treatment at the hepatitis C clinic at the VA hospital in Des Moines, Iowa. They were both very pleased with the care provided at the VA. "We were very impressed with the care and the friends we've made at the VA and we know that they are only a phone call away."

One of Dennis' biggest fears is to pass hepatitis C on to his wife, children, or grandchildren. He is now glad that he knows about his diagnosis so he can protect his loved ones from the disease. "You don't pass hepatitis C by hugging your grandkids or giving them a kiss on the cheek."

Now that their children are adults, Dennis and Charla enjoy riding their motorcycle, camping, and hunting for arrowheads. They also enjoy their friends at the recovery meetings they attend three times a week.

They both say that "today we are living the way we should have been living all along." "If not for your own sake, get tested for the safety of your children or grandchildren."



Mike

MIKE JOINED THE UNITED STATES ARMY in 1965. He was in the 101st Airborne Division and went to Vietnam in 1966. With the help of a 12-step program Mike has been clean and sober for five years. However, he believes that his past drug use, specifically sharing a hit of heroin with a friend, is how he became infected with hepatitis C.

Mike, like so many other Veterans, did not know what hepatitis C was and when he was diagnosed with the disease he was in denial. In addition to hepatitis C, Mike also has hepatitis B. He says that there is a noticeable difference between the two diseases because hepatitis B made him feel sick while he couldn't tell that he had hepatitis C because he experienced no physical symptoms.

Mike received his treatment and care from the VA hospital and is very grateful for

the care and knowledge that he has received from them. He says that "if I knew then what I know now I don't know if I would have turned down that hit or not, but I definitely would have thought twice about it."

Mike is a strong advocate for Veterans living with hepatitis C.

"We raised our right hand and took an oath that we would give our lives for an ideal. That ideal was freedom and we still have that inside of us and now it is time to live for that ideal. Knowledge is freedom."

RECOMMENDATIONS, TREATMENT, VACCINATIONS

Currently there is no vaccine or other preventive treatment for HCV. Knowing your status can help stop the transmission of HCV. If you are or have been at risk, ask for a blood test.

PREVENTION

If you shoot drugs, stopping and getting into a treatment program is the first step to reducing your risk. If you cannot stop never reuse or share needles, syringes, water, or "works."

Do not share personal care items such as razors or toothbrushes as they might have blood on them.

TREATMENT

Many people with chronic (long-term) hepatitis C have no symptoms and feel well, but should still see their doctor.

Treatment is available for those infected with HCV.

It is important for those infected with HCV to abstain from drinking alcohol as this can worsen the progression of the disease.

VACCINATION

If you have already been infected with HCV that does not mean you are infected with hepatitis A or hepatitis B. There are vaccines available to protect you from hepatitis A and hepatitis B which can help protect you against further damage to your liver.

- 55-85% of infected persons progress to develop chronic infection.
- 1-5% of those infected may die from chronic liver disease.
- Hepatitis C is the leading cause for liver transplant.

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KNOWING YOUR HEPATITIS C STATUS CAN HELP PROTECT YOUR HEALTH AND THOSE YOU CARE ABOUT.