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
  - Difficulty for cigarettes and food
  - Dark urine and light stool.

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. Learning about 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
- These 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 tired/motivation 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 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

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.
**Art**

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.

**Dennis and Charla**

Art joined the Marine Corps right after high school in 1964. 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 this service, he was concerned that during his carpentry work as a carpenter for 30 years, he may have been exposed to hepatitis C because of his tattoos and post surgery. The results were positive for hepatitis C. Dennis attributes this to a history of injecting drug use. Charlie and their children were afflicted, with negative results.

Dennis received treatment at the hepatitis C clinic at the VA hospital in Des Moines, Iowa. He was 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’s biggest fears is to pass hepatitis C to his wife, children, or grandchildren. He is now glad that he knew 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 motorcycles, 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 post drug use, specifically sharing a hit of heroin with a friend, is how he became infected with hepatitis C.

He, like so many other Veterans, did not know what hepatitis C was and when he was diagnosed with the disease it was a shock. 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 makes him feel sick while he coach told him 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 “I knew then what I know now and I don’t know if I should 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.

**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, Charlie, have been married for 33 years and are both recovering drug users. During a routine physical exam, Dennis’s doctor requested that he be tested for hepatitis C because of his tattoos and post surgery. The results were positive for hepatitis C. Dennis attributes this to a history of injecting drug use. Charlie and their children were afflicted, with negative results.**

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

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