

# Hepatitis C and the link to liver disease

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During the past 35 years, the Hepatitis C virus has been identified as the leading cause of chronic liver disease world-wide. Approximately 5-10% of infected individuals will develop cirrhosis over a 20-30 year period of time.

The virus cannot easily be transmitted. Contaminated blood products and intravenous drug use are the main sources of infection. Spread of the virus is rare through sexual contact, and shaking hands or sharing meals offers no risk of spreading the virus.

Most patients with chronic infection have no symptoms. However, fatigue is a common complaint. More specific systems such as joint and muscle aching, poor appetite and weight loss can also be caused by the virus. When the virus continues to damage the liver, scar tissue forms and the liver begins to develop cirrhosis. This occurs in a small number of people, but determining which patients will develop cirrhosis is unpredictable. A liver biopsy can best determine the amount of damage.

A simple blood test for Hepatitis C

Antibody is the first and best screening for the virus. If positive, a second blood test is drawn to determine how much virus is present in the blood.

For many years, doctors had prescribed medications that failed to control the virus completely, often with serious side effects. However, during the past two years, medications have become available that can now cure the virus infection in 96-99% of persons with this disease with almost no side effects. With the aid of these stronger drugs, it is hoped that Hepatitis C and its devastating effects will no longer be a world-wide threat.



ARTICLE APPEARED IN JULY/AUGUST 2015

WOMAN  
NEWSPAPERS