

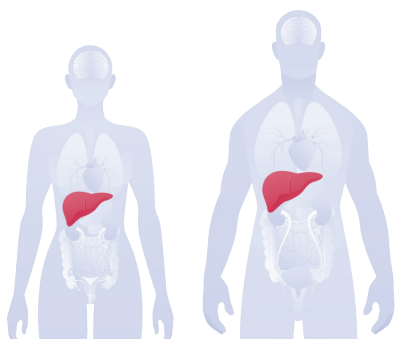
HEPATITIS C and Your Liver

Your liver is one of your body's most important organs. It cleans toxins from your body and helps you digest food and absorb nutrients. It is sometimes called the "silent organ" because it does not have pain cells, so it cannot feel when damage occurs. The hepatitis C virus lives in blood and can cause damage to the liver over time. It is important for people with hepatitis to understand their liver and how to protect it.



What does my liver look like?

The liver is the largest organ inside the body. In an adult, it is about the size of a football and weighs close to three pounds. It is located behind the ribs in the upper right-hand portion of the abdomen. Shaped like a triangle, the liver is dark reddish brown and consists of two main lobes.



How important is my liver?

The liver is such an important organ that we can survive only one or two days if it shuts down – if the liver fails, your body will fail, too. Fortunately, the liver can function even when up to 75% of it is diseased or removed. This is because it has the amazing ability to create new liver tissue from healthy liver cells.

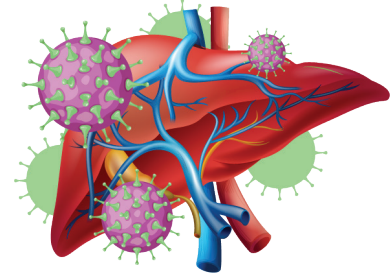
What does my liver do?

If your body were an automobile, your liver would be considered the engine. It has hundreds of functions vital to keeping the body healthy. Some of the most important functions of the liver include:

- Stores vitamins, sugar, and iron to help give your body energy.
- Controls the production and removal of cholesterol.
- Clears your body of waste products, certain medications, alcohol and some other drugs, and poisonous substances.
- Makes clotting factors to stop excessive bleeding after cuts or injuries.
- Makes immune factors and removes bacteria from the blood to fight infection.
- Releases a substance called "bile" to help digest food and absorb nutrients.

What is hepatitis?

The medical term “hepatitis” means “inflammation of the liver.” Chronic inflammation of the liver may result in liver damage or failure if left untreated. Hepatitis can have many causes, including drinking too much alcohol, an injury, autoimmune disorders, adverse drug reactions, and herbal treatments/supplements.



Hepatitis is most commonly caused by a virus. When hepatitis is caused by a virus, it is given a letter (e.g., hepatitis A, hepatitis B, hepatitis C). All of these viruses impact the liver, but spread in different ways and have different treatment. The most common form of viral hepatitis in the United States is hepatitis C.

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C spreads through contact with blood from an infected person. Today, most new hepatitis C infections are spread by sharing equipment used to prepare and inject drugs, such as syringes, needles, cottons, or cookers.

People born between 1945-1965 (also known as Baby Boomers) also have a higher rate of hepatitis C than people in other age groups. Because most people who get hepatitis C do not have symptoms, many people don’t realize they have it. If left untreated, hepatitis C can cause serious health problems including liver damage, liver cancer, or even death.

About one in three people with hepatitis C get rid of or “clear” the virus on their own without treatment. Most people who are exposed to hepatitis C develop a lifelong infection that requires treatment. Anyone with a hepatitis C infection can pass the virus on to others. People with hepatitis C infection are at increased risk for liver problems later in life if the virus is left untreated. Fortunately, safe, and effective treatment is available that results in a cure for most people with hepatitis C.

Most people who have hepatitis C don’t have any symptoms. It’s important to get tested to find out if you have the virus. The CDC recommends all adults over the age of 18 get tested at least once in their lifetime. All pregnant people should get tested during each pregnancy. People who currently inject and share needles, syringes, or other drug preparation equipment should get tested at least once per year. Ask your healthcare provider about getting tested today!

How can the hepatitis C virus damage my liver?

A healthy liver is soft and flexible. Hepatitis C attacks the liver constantly, which leads it to scar and harden over time. While trying to repair itself, the liver forms tiny scars (called fibrosis). When fibrosis becomes even more severe, blood cannot flow freely through the scarred liver tissue, which causes it to shrink and become harder (called cirrhosis). Cirrhosis can result in liver failure, liver cancer, or even death.

In addition, fibrosis and cirrhosis can make it harder for the liver to do its important functions, like filtering substances and supporting your metabolism. When your liver isn't working properly, it can't process drugs and alcohol as easily. This makes them more likely to build up in your body, which can be toxic and lead to an increased likelihood of overdose.

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

New hepatitis C treatments can cure more than 95% of people with as little as 8 weeks of oral medication and few side effects. These medications, called direct-acting antivirals (or DAAs), prevent the hepatitis C virus from replicating or copying itself. DAAs are safe and effective for most patients and can be provided by any healthcare provider licensed to prescribe medications in the state of Washington. Interferon-based treatment, known for its harsh side effects, is no longer used to treat hepatitis C.

How can I prevent hepatitis C?

Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. In addition, you cannot be immune to it if you clear the virus, either naturally following exposure or by getting treated with DAA medication. To prevent hepatitis C, limit exposure to other people's blood and:

- Avoid sharing needles, syringes, or other equipment used to inject drugs, steroids, hormones, or other substances. Avoid sharing drug snorting equipment or glass pipes with cracked edges.
- Do not use personal items that may have an infected person's blood on them, even if the blood is not visible. This includes razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes or glucose monitors.
- Only get tattoos, permanent makeup or body piercings from professionals licensed by the Department of Licensing (<https://dol.wa.gov>).
- Get tested once a year if you have an ongoing risk for hepatitis C, such as sharing equipment used to inject drugs, silicone, hormones, or vitamins, equipment for drug snorting, or glass pipes with cracked edges.

For more information, visit: <http://www.doh.wa.gov/hep-c-hub>

Some of the information in this document is adapted with permission from the Hepatitis B Foundation's Hepatitis B and Your Liver educational handout.



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