

Hepatitis C

Infection with hepatitis C virus (HCV) causes acute and chronic hepatitis C disease. HCV is found in the blood of persons who have the disease. The most common signs and symptoms of hepatitis C include: jaundice, fatigue, dark urine, abdominal pain, loss of appetite and nausea. However, 80% of persons are asymptomatic. Hepatitis C cases are underreported due to the fact that most persons are asymptomatic and that there are no laboratory tests for acute HCV infection. Hepatitis C can lead to liver damage and sometimes death due to liver breakdown. Nearly 4.1 million people in the United States have been infected with hepatitis C, of whom 3.2 million are chronically infected. Chronic liver disease develops in up to 70% of chronically infected persons. Hepatitis C infection is the leading indication for liver transplant. Currently, 8,000 to 10,000 people die each year in the United States from hepatitis C. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is spread from one person to another primarily by direct contact with human blood. Most infections are due to illegal injection drug use. The virus can also be transmitted through sexual contact and from infected mothers to their infants at the time of birth. The risk for perinatal HCV transmission is about 4%. If the mother is coinfecting with HIV, the risk for perinatal infection increases to about 19%. Since the adoption of routine blood donor screening in 1992, transfusion-associated cases now occur less than one per 2 million units of blood transfused.