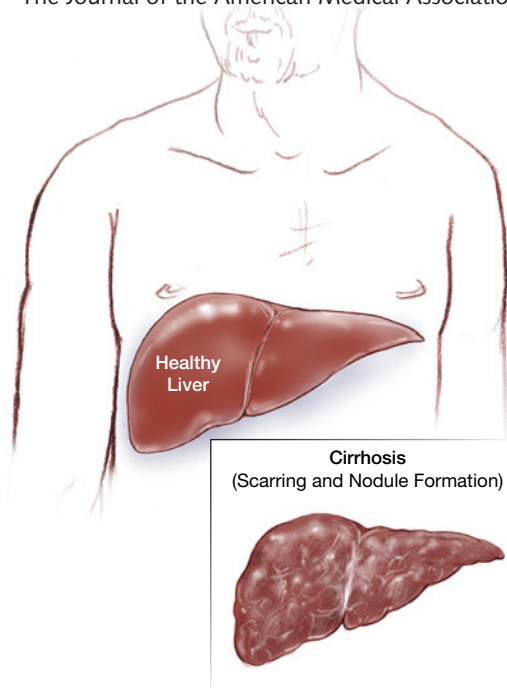


# Hepatitis C

**H**epatitis C virus (HCV) is a virus that can damage the liver. About 2% of Americans are infected with HCV. Hepatitis C, the liver disease caused by HCV, is a common worldwide problem and leads to 12,000 deaths each year in the United States. You can be infected with the virus and not know you have it. Hepatitis C virus spreads by contact with blood from an infected individual. A simple blood test can show if you are infected with HCV. Since 1992, all blood donations have been tested for HCV. About three quarters of persons infected with HCV develop **chronic** (long-term) hepatitis. Fortunately, only about one quarter develop progressive, irreversible liver damage. In those cases, liver tissue is gradually destroyed over time and replaced with scar tissue (**cirrhosis**). In the presence of cirrhosis, liver failure and liver cancer can occur. The May 14, 2003, issue of JAMA includes an article about hepatitis C.



## RISK FACTORS FOR HEPATITIS C INFECTION

- Blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992
- Exposure to infected blood
- Illegal drug use (contaminated needles or other drug equipment)
- Tattoos
- Body piercing

## OTHER TYPES OF HEPATITIS

- **Hepatitis A** (usually from food or feces contaminated by infected individuals)
- **Hepatitis B** (from infected blood, sexual contact, or mother-to-baby transmission)
- **Hepatitis D, E, and G** (usually from infected blood or blood products)

## TREATMENTS FOR HEPATITIS C INFECTION

- Alcohol use should be completely stopped because it greatly increases the risk for cirrhosis
- **Interferon** (stops the virus from making more copies of itself)
- **Ribavirin** (an antiviral medication)
- Liver transplantation (if the patient's liver is no longer functioning adequately)

Elimination of HCV from the body is possible, but the side effects of treatment can be serious. Your doctor may suggest that mild cases of hepatitis C infection should be watched carefully and treatment started if the disease begins to progress. Medical research studies are ongoing to help answer questions about hepatitis C treatment. Transplantation of a new liver to replace the liver damaged by hepatitis C is an option for treatment of advanced cirrhosis or early liver cancer. Transplantation is limited by the number of organs available for donation. Liver transplantation is major surgery, and lifelong medications are required after the transplant to prevent the body from rejecting the transplanted liver.

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Hepatitis Foundation International  
www.hepfi.org  
800/891-0707
- American Liver Foundation  
www.liverfoundation.org  
800/GO-LIVER (465-4837)
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases  
www.niddk.nih.gov/health/digest/  
/pubs/chrnhepc/chrnhepc.htm  
800/891-5389

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA's Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on preventing hepatitis B was published in the November 10, 1999, issue; and one on diseases transmitted by blood and body fluids was published in the July 12, 2000, issue.

Sources: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases

