



# Facts About Hepatitis C For People Who Test Positive

## If you tested positive for hepatitis C, what does it mean?

If you tested positive for hepatitis C, it means you have been infected with the hepatitis C virus. You are not alone; about 4 million Americans have been infected with hepatitis C.

You should see your doctor or nurse practitioner for more tests. There are also things you can do to stay healthy, such as living a healthy lifestyle and not drinking alcohol.

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that infects the liver.

In some cases, it can cause the liver to become inflamed and damaged. Liver damage makes it hard for the liver to work properly, and this can cause serious health problems. Sometimes, a serious condition called cirrhosis can develop.

## What happens when a person has hepatitis C?

Liver damage is the main concern in people with hepatitis C. The damage usually happens over many years or even decades.

People with hepatitis C who drink alcohol regularly are much more likely to develop serious liver damage than those who don't drink. It is important to stop drinking alcohol because this can make the disease worse much more quickly.

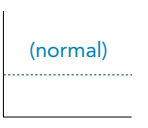
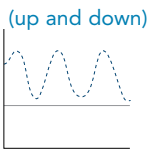
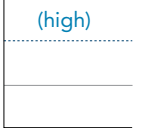
Most people with hepatitis C have some liver damage but will not develop serious liver problems. For every 100 people:

- 15-25 will be cured without treatment
- 75-85 will remain infected

Some people who have hepatitis C for a long time (over 20 years) never develop liver damage. Out of 100 people infected for a long time, 80 do not develop serious liver damage. Inflammation caused by the hepatitis C virus can lead to scarring of the liver or fibrosis.

Scarring and fibrosis damage the liver and can cause cirrhosis, liver disease that becomes progressively worse. Those with cirrhosis are also at greater risk for liver cancer.

### ALT pattern: What does it mean?

 <p>(normal)</p>	People with a normal ALT level each time their blood is checked usually have very mild disease and may never have any serious liver problems from hepatitis C.
 <p>(up and down)</p>	Most people with hepatitis C have ALT levels that go up and down or stay high. These people usually have some liver damage. The damage usually develops slowly and in many people is very mild.
 <p>(high)</p>	

## How can you tell if you have liver damage?

### 1. Blood tests

Blood tests can be done to check for liver damage. A common one is the ALT test. When the liver is injured, the ALT level in your blood often increases. Hepatitis C has peaks and valleys of activity, so your ALT level may change over time.

### 2. Liver biopsy

Your doctor may also recommend a liver biopsy. In a biopsy, a small piece of liver tissue is removed and examined under a microscope. This is the only way to tell how much the liver has been damaged or how much it is inflamed.

## Why is liver damage dangerous?

You cannot live without your liver.

The liver:

- keeps toxins and poisons, including drugs and alcohol, from harming your body
- makes fats, proteins, and chemicals needed for blood clotting
- performs many other roles to keep you healthy

A damaged liver can't do these tasks well and can put your health at risk.

## Is treatment available?

Treatment is available, but it does not always work. Treatment may be recommended for people who are at greater risk of developing serious liver damage or cirrhosis. Studies show that getting rid of the virus can help prevent further liver damage. The most effective treatment for hepatitis C at this time is a combination of two medications (*interferon* or *pegylated interferon* and *ribavirin*).

## Alcohol and hepatitis C

Alcohol can cause major problems for people with hepatitis C. You can greatly improve your chances of staying healthy by not drinking alcohol.

Alcohol can cause damage to the liver. It can also make the hepatitis C virus more likely to cause severe damage in

a short period of time. If you do not drink alcohol or if you quit drinking, you are more likely to have only mild liver disease.

## How do you know if treatment is right for you?

You and your doctor will decide whether treatment is right for you. Here are some things to think about before you make a decision:

- *The treatment will mean giving yourself injections and taking pills* for at least six months.
- *The treatment may not work.* Treatment cures about **one** out of every **two** people who take it.
- *Most people who take the treatment have some side effects.* The most common side effects are headache, nausea, tiredness, anemia, muscle pain and fever. Side effects can also include hair loss, insomnia, anxiety, and depression. About 10 percent of patients stop taking treatment because of side effects.
- *Ribavirin can cause serious birth defects.* For this reason, it should not be taken by women who are pregnant or who are trying to get pregnant. Both men and women taking ribavirin should practice birth control during treatment and for six months after treatment.

It is important to weigh the pros and cons carefully before you decide whether or not to take these medications. If you and your doctor decide that treatment is the right choice, you may be referred to a specialist for additional help.

## What else can you do to stay healthy?

You can reduce your chances of having problems from hepatitis C by taking steps to improve your overall health:

Terms related to hepatitis C	
<b>ALT test</b>	(alanine aminotransferase) Blood test that can be done to check for liver damage.
<b>Cirrhosis</b>	Condition in which there is widespread disruption of normal liver structure.
<b>Fibrosis</b>	Scarring of the liver.
<b>Hepatitis</b>	Inflammation of the liver. Can be caused by any of several viruses.
<b>Hepatitis C</b>	An infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus, one of the most common causes of hepatitis.
<b>Interferon / ribavirin</b>	A combination of these two medications is sometimes used to treat hepatitis C.
<b>Liver biopsy</b>	A small piece of liver tissue is removed from your body and examined under the microscope to determine how much your liver has been damaged

- avoid drugs and alcohol
- eat a healthy diet
- get plenty of rest and exercise
- continue to do the healthy activities that you enjoy most

Medication, as well as some herbal remedies, can affect your liver. It is important to talk with your doctor or nurse practitioner before taking anything new.

Medical professionals suggest that people with hepatitis C get checked regularly for any new liver damage. Ask your doctor how often you should be tested.

## Is hepatitis C spread sexually?

Hepatitis C can be spread by sex, but this does not happen very often. Long-term sexual partners of people with hepatitis C rarely test positive for the virus. If you want to reduce the small chance of spreading the hepatitis C virus to your sex partner, you may decide to use barrier precautions such as latex condoms for anal and vaginal sex. You might also consider avoiding sex if you or your partner is menstruating, or if one of you has open cuts or sores on the genitals. Your partner may wish to talk to their doctor to determine if testing is right for them.

## Daily precautions

You can help keep others from being infected with hepatitis C. We recommend that you:

- do not donate blood
- do not share needles for drug use, tattoos, or piercing
- do not share “straws” for snorting cocaine or other drugs
- throw needles away in a container made for that purpose (your pharmacist or medical professional can instruct you on safe needle disposal)
- avoid sharing razors and toothbrushes
- cover cuts and wounds
- practice safer sex

## Other types of hepatitis

If you tested positive for hepatitis C, you should also talk with your doctor or nurse practitioner about other types of hepatitis. He or she may recommend that you get the hepatitis A and B vaccines.

### Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at **kp.org** to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.