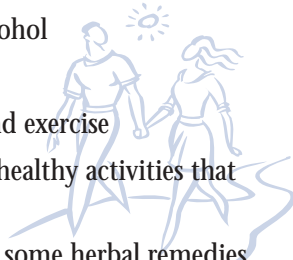


## What else can you do to stay healthy?

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

- 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.

## More resources on hepatitis C

- Visit our Web site at [www.kaiserpermanente.org](http://www.kaiserpermanente.org)
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*
- Call the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone (1-800-33-ASK ME)
- Visit your local Health Education Department or Center



## Terms related to hepatitis C

ALT test	Blood test that can be done to check for liver damage.
Cirrhosis	Condition in which there is widespread disruption of normal liver structure.
Fibrosis	Scarring of the liver.
Hepatitis	Inflammation of the liver. Can be caused by any of several viruses.
Hepatitis C	An infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus, one of the most common causes of hepatitis.
Interferon/ribavirin	A combination of these two medications is sometimes used to treat hepatitis C.
Liver biopsy	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.

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

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# Facts About Hepatitis C

## For People Who Test Positive



KAISER PERMANENTE®

## 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. When the liver is damaged, a condition called *cirrhosis* can develop. Liver damage makes it hard for the liver to work properly. This can cause serious health problems.

## What happens when a person has hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C can cause liver damage. This usually happens over many years or even decades.

People 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 any 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

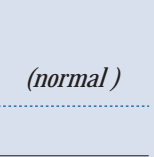
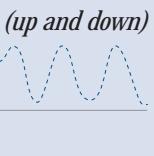
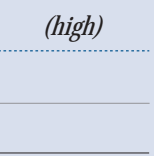
damage. Out of 100 people infected for a long time, 80 do not develop serious liver damage.

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. Those with cirrhosis are also at greater risk for liver cancer.

## 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.

ALT pattern:	What does it mean?
 (normal)	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.
 (up and down)	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.
 (high)	

## 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

## 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

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 (Jan 2003) 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.

**Avoiding alcohol is important to help prevent more damage to your liver**



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.