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# When Your Child Has the Hepatitis C Virus (HCV)

Your child has been diagnosed with a hepatitis infection caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Hepatitis causes inflammation of the liver. Treatment with antiviral medicine is recommended for all ages 3 years and older. Hepatitis C may cause a chronic (lifelong) problem. Hepatitis C may not cause symptoms until later in the disease. Even so, hepatitis C can cause severe liver damage over time. A child who has been infected with the Hepatitis C virus can pass the virus to others.

## How did my child get hepatitis C?

HCV spreads through blood. Infection can happen when blood containing the virus gets into a healthy person's body. In many cases, how a person got infected is not known for sure. HCV can be passed in these ways:

- From mother to baby during birth
- Through contact with infected blood, such as by touching an open cut or scrape (HCV can also spread if you use an item that has even a tiny amount of an infected person's blood on it, including personal care items, such as toothbrushes, nail clippers, or pierced earrings, and tattoo or drug needles)
- Through infected blood products during a transfusion. Careful screening of donated blood makes this type of transmission very rare in the U.S.
- During dialysis (a treatment for kidney failure)
- Through unprotected sex with an infected person

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C infection?

HCV usually does not cause symptoms in children. This means someone can be infected for years without knowing. If any symptoms do occur, they will likely be a mild flu-like illness. Other symptoms may include:

- Pain in the upper right abdomen (where the liver is)
- Swollen abdomen
- Tiredness and weakness
- Confusion or forgetfulness
- Headache
- Sore muscles and joints
- Upset stomach, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Blood in vomit or stool

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- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes, dark urine, or gray- or clay-colored stools)
  - Itchy skin
  - Low-grade fever

## **How is hepatitis C diagnosed?**

The healthcare provider asks questions to find out how your child may have been exposed to hepatitis C. The healthcare provider also does an exam. Your child's blood is tested for HCV. Other tests may be done to see how healthy the liver is and to look for signs of liver damage.

## **How is hepatitis C treated?**

Though there are currently no vaccines available, new antiviral medicines are very effective in treating HCV infection in children age 3 years and older. They are all oral and have few side effects. But all medicines have risks. If it's an option for your child, the healthcare provider can talk with you about the pros and cons of medicine.

## **Protect your child's health and prevent spread**

- Ask your child's healthcare provider for a list of medicines the child should not take. Many prescription and over-the-counter medicines stress the liver, so they should be avoided. Tell any healthcare provider who prescribes medicine for your child that your child has hepatitis.
- Be aware that some herbs and supplements can strain the liver. Talk with your child's healthcare provider before giving the child anything you buy over the counter.
- Make sure your child eats healthy foods. A diet low in fat, high in fiber, and full of fresh fruits and vegetables can help keep your child healthy.
- Teach your child to not drink alcohol. Alcohol can cause severe liver damage in people with hepatitis. If you teach your child to stay away from alcohol at a young age, they may be more likely to drink less or abstain as an adult.
- Have your child vaccinated against hepatitis A and B. These are 2 other forms of hepatitis that could cause more damage to the liver. Other people in your household should also have hepatitis A and B vaccines. There is currently no vaccine for hepatitis C.
- Teach your child how to prevent the spread of hepatitis C to others. Take steps to prevent exposing yourself to your child's hepatitis C. Since hepatitis C can be spread through blood, take steps to avoid sharing items such as toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or any other items that may contain blood.

## **What are the long-term concerns?**

A child with chronic HCV infection should visit the healthcare provider regularly. This way, the healthcare provider can watch for liver damage. Tests will be done to monitor the health of your child's liver. Hepatitis C causes damage over many years. A child with hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis (scarring in the liver) or liver cancer as an adult. This can

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lead to problems, and possibly the need for a liver transplant. This is why you should talk about treatment with your child's healthcare provider.

## **When to call your child's healthcare provider**

Call your child's healthcare provider right away if your child:

- Has signs of dehydration, such as decreased urination, very dark urine, dry mouth, refusal to drink fluids, and no tears when crying
- Is extremely irritable or drowsy
- Has swelling in the hands, arms, feet, ankles, abdomen, or face
- Bleeds from the nose, mouth, or rectum, or has bloody stools
- Bruises more easily than normal