

## Patient education: Hepatitis C (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

**What is hepatitis C?** — Hepatitis C is a disease that harms the liver. The liver is a big organ in the upper right side of the belly ([figure 1](#)). A virus causes this disease. The virus is called the hepatitis C virus. It spreads from person to person through contact with blood. This can happen in a few ways, like sharing drug needles or having sex.

**What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?** — Most people with hepatitis C have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Feeling tired or weak
- Lack of hunger
- Nausea
- Muscle or joint aches
- Weight loss

In most cases, hepatitis C lasts for many years. That can lead to liver scarring, called "cirrhosis." Many people with cirrhosis have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they can include:

- Swelling in the belly and legs, and fluid build-up in the lungs
- Bruising or bleeding easily
- Trouble taking in a full breath
- Feeling full in the belly
- Yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes, called jaundice
- Confusion that can come on suddenly
- Coma

**How did I get the disease?** — You can catch the hepatitis C virus if you have contact with the blood of someone who is infected. This can happen if you:

- Share drug needles or cocaine straws
- Use infected needles for tattooing, acupuncture, or piercings
- Share toothbrushes, razors, or other things that could have blood on them
- Got a blood transfusion in the United States before 1990 (after that time, blood banks started testing donated blood for hepatitis C)
- Have sex with someone who is infected

A pregnant woman who is infected can also give hepatitis C to her baby.

Some people who have hepatitis C do not remember how they were infected. In the United States, many people with hepatitis C were born between 1945 and 1965. If you were born during these years, your doctor might want to test you for hepatitis C even if you did not do any of the things that put you at risk of infection.

**Is there a test for hepatitis C?** — Yes. Your doctor might order a few tests:

- Blood tests can show:
  - If you have hepatitis C
  - What type of the virus you have (there are at least 6 types)
  - Which treatment will work best for you

If you have hepatitis C, your doctor will also want to know if you have any liver scarring. Ways to check for scarring include:

- Blood tests
- Liver scan – This is a type of imaging test that can show how much scarring you have. Not all doctors have access to the machine that does the scan.
- Biopsy – For this test, a doctor puts a needle into your liver and takes out a small sample of tissue. The sample will show how bad the damage is.

**How is hepatitis C treated?** — Treatment depends on what type of hepatitis C you have. There are different medicines to treat hepatitis C. Some of them only work on certain forms of the hepatitis C virus. You will have to take a combination of 2 or more medicines based on which virus you have. Treatment usually lasts 3 to 6 months. The medicines come in pill form.

Some of the medicines used to treat hepatitis C are not appropriate for pregnant women, or for men or women who are not using reliable birth control. Before you start treatment, ask your doctor whether you need to be on reliable birth control for the treatment he or she suggests. Your doctor can help you decide if these medicines are right for you.

**Is there anything I can do to protect my liver?** — Yes, you can:

- Avoid alcohol
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B
- Get vaccinated for pneumonia, the flu, and other diseases
- Ask your doctor or nurse before taking any over-the-counter pain medicines (these medicines can sometimes damage the liver).
- Avoid marijuana

**What if I want to get pregnant?** — If you want to get pregnant, talk to your doctor or nurse first. About 1 in 20 women who have hepatitis C pass the virus on to the baby during pregnancy. That number goes up in women who are also infected with HIV.

**What will my life be like?** — Many people with hepatitis C are able to live normal lives. Treatment can cure the disease in many cases.

If you have hepatitis C, it is still safe to:

- Hug, kiss, and touch other people (but you can spread the infection through sex)
- Share forks, spoons, cups, and food
- Sneeze or cough
- Breastfeed

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[Patient education: Treatment for hepatitis C \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Alcohol use — when is drinking a problem? \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Hepatitis B \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Cirrhosis \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Liver transplant \(The Basics\)](#)

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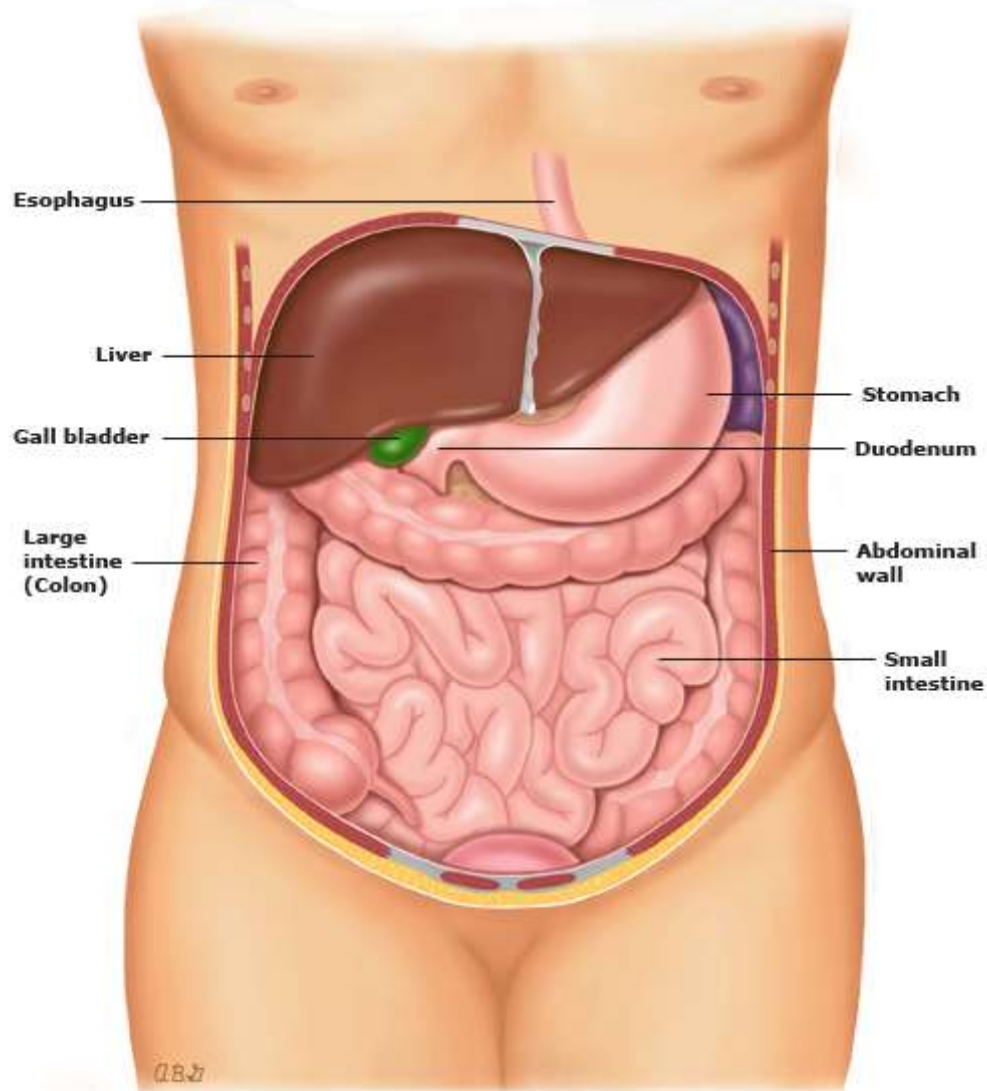
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## GRAPHICS

### Organs inside the abdomen (belly)

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