

LINKAGE TO CARE

Hepatitis C Patient Guide



NKYHEALTH
NORTHERN KENTUCKY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus. Over time, hepatitis C can cause serious health problems such as liver failure, liver cancer or death.

Liver damage from hepatitis C can be avoided by finding out you have the virus early so that you can get immediate care and treatment. Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine to keep someone from getting hepatitis C; however, hepatitis C can be treated and cured!*

What are the signs?

Signs of hepatitis C can include feeling tired, fever, upset stomach, not feeling hungry, muscle or joint pain, dark urine, grey-colored bowel movements, and yellow skin and eyes. It is possible to have the infection and not experience the symptoms for years.

How is it spread?

It is spread by contact with blood that carries the hepatitis C virus. Today, most people become infected by sharing needles or other tools that are used to prepare or inject drugs. People born from 1945–1965, sometimes called “baby boomers,” are five times more likely to have hepatitis C than other adults.

**Cure means the virus is not detected in your blood when measured three months after treatment is completed.*

LINKAGE TO CARE

Once you learn that you are infected with hepatitis C, it is important that you receive proper medical care. A doctor can monitor your liver disease. They can also help you learn how to take care of your liver and give you information on hepatitis C treatments.

What if I am still actively using illicit drugs? Are there any resources to help me with that?

- Active substance use is no longer a barrier for receiving treatment for hepatitis C*
- For resources on substance use treatment, visit findhelpnowky.org
- Call the NKY Addiction Helpline at 859-415-9280.

**According to the Kentucky Medicaid fee for service benefit, as of October 27, 2017 alcohol or substance use no longer disqualifies recipients from an initial course of hepatitis C treatment (KY Department for Public Health, 2018).*

FIRST STEPS

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

There are several medications available to treat hepatitis C. Hepatitis C treatments have gotten better in recent years. Current treatments usually involve just 8-12 weeks of pills, and cure over 90% of people with few side effects.

What is my first step to begin treatment for hepatitis C?

Medical health insurance will be needed for your doctor appointments and assistance with the medications needed for a cure.

- If you currently do not have medical benefits in Kentucky, *kynect* can be a resource for you. *kynect* allows Kentucky families to easily access public assistance benefits and information 24/7 through an online application and account. For more information, visit: <https://kynect.ky.gov/benefits>
- You can visit the Kentucky Health Benefit Exchange at: <https://healthbenefitexchange.ky.gov/Pages/index.aspx>
- For local help, including one-on-one meetings, to sign up for medical benefits, contact the Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission (NKCAC). The website is: <https://www.nkcac.org/>
- You can also visit www.healthcare.gov to preview plans and prices.

HEALTHY BEHAVIORS

What can I do to get ready for my doctor's appointments and treatment?

Lifestyle

If you have hepatitis C, your doctor may ask you to make changes to the way you live your life. These changes can help keep you healthy longer and protect the health of others:

- **Avoid drinking alcohol.** Alcohol use can cause your liver disease to get worse.
- **Avoid medications that can cause liver damage.** Review all of the medicine you take with your doctor, including over-the-counter medications, herbal preparations and dietary supplements. Your doctor may tell you to stop taking certain medications.
- **Help prevent others from coming into contact with your blood.** Cover any wounds you have. Do not share razors or toothbrushes. Do not donate blood, body organs or semen, and let healthcare workers know that you have the virus. Also, tell your partner about your infection before having sex, and always use condoms during intercourse.

Vaccinations

There is no vaccination for hepatitis C; however, your doctor may suggest that you receive vaccines for hepatitis A and B. These two different viruses can also cause liver damage. If needed, the hepatitis A and B vaccines are available at all four Northern Kentucky Health Department county clinics or at your doctor's office.

BE PREPARED

What to do before your appointment

Be prepared for your doctor appointments. Sometimes appointments can be short, and because there is often a lot to discuss, it is a good idea to be ready. To get ready, try to:

- **Review your medical record.** This is very important if you are seeing a doctor who is a liver specialist (hepatologist) for the first time after learning you have hepatitis C. If you had blood tests to find out your hepatitis C genotype, how your liver is working, or other blood work, scans, or tests, make sure you know the results so you can share them with the doctor. You may need to sign a medical release of information for your doctor to get a copy of all of your lab work, tests and medical records.
- **Write down any symptoms you are experiencing,** including any that may seem like they have nothing to do with your hepatitis C diagnosis.
- **Make a list of all medications,** vitamins and supplements you take.
- **Consider taking a family member or friend to your appointment.** Sometimes it can be difficult to remember all of the information you will be given during your appointment. Having someone go with you may help you remember something that may be missed or forgotten.

BE PREPARED

Questions to ask your doctor

To make the most of your time with your doctor, take along a list of questions you want to ask. For a hepatitis C infection, some basic questions to ask your doctor include:

- Do I need treatment for my hepatitis C infection?
- What are my treatment options?
- What are the benefits and potential risks of each treatment option?
- Is there one treatment you recommend that is best for me?
- Will my other medical conditions affect my hepatitis C treatment?
- Should my family and partners be tested for hepatitis C?
- How can I keep the people around me from getting the hepatitis C virus?
- Will I need to see a specialist?
- Are there materials or brochures that I can take with me, or websites you recommend?
- Which medications should I avoid?
- Does your office work with a pharmacy to assist with payment of the medication?

Do not be afraid to ask any other questions that you think of during your appointment.

WHAT TO EXPECT

What to expect from your doctor

Your doctor will probably ask you some of the following questions. Being ready with your answers may help this part of the visit go more quickly than usual, leaving you more time to talk about things you want to talk about.

- Have you ever had an organ transplant or a blood transfusion? If so, when?
- Have you ever injected drugs not prescribed by your doctor?
- Have you ever been diagnosed with jaundice or hepatitis?
- Is there a family history of liver disease or hepatitis C?

Once you have been diagnosed with a hepatitis C infection, your doctor may refer you to a specialist in liver diseases (hepatologist) or infectious diseases.

Because of how fast we are learning about hepatitis C, recommendations for medications and treatment for people with hepatitis C change quickly. It is best to discuss your treatment options with your doctor or a specialist.

NKY HEALTH CONTACTS

Where can I go for more information?

Northern Kentucky Health Department has a Hepatitis C Linkage to Care Coordinator. Susan Guthier, RN, BSN is available to help you navigate questions, find a doctor, and share resources with you. For more information on hepatitis C, email or call:

Susan.Guthier@nkyhealth.org (phone) 859-363-2090 (cell) 859-279-5375

To get a second test to confirm you have hepatitis C, or if you are interested in learning more about the different services offered at NKY Health, go to www.nkyhealth.org or contact the county health center most convenient for you. Health Centers are open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Same day appointments are available for most programs.

Boone County Health Center

7505 Burlington Pike
Florence, KY 41042
859-363-2060

Campbell County Health Center

1098 Monmouth St.
Newport, KY 41071
859-431-1704

Grant County Health Center

234 Barnes Road
Williamstown, KY 41097
859-824-5074

Kenton County Health Center

2002 Madison Ave.
Covington, KY 41014
859-431-3345

HEPATITIS C TERMS

CHRONIC HEPATITIS C INFECTION

In chronic hepatitis C, the hepatitis C virus remains in the body after the acute infection. Chronic hepatitis C can lead to serious liver damage.

CIRRHOSIS

Severe scarring of the liver. Cirrhosis can cause your liver to stop working as well as it should.

CURE

Cure is a medical term. You are considered cured when a lab test done 3 months after you've completed treatment does not find any hepatitis C virus in your blood.

FIBROSIS

Scarring in the liver. As hepatitis C progresses, scar tissue can replace healthy liver tissue. The liver may then stop working as well as it should.

GENOTYPE

The hepatitis C virus has at least 6 different types. They are called "genotypes." Genotype 1 is the most common in the U.S.

HEPATITIS C ANTIBODY TEST

A blood test that looks for antibodies related to the hepatitis C virus. If you have ever been infected with hepatitis C, you will have antibodies.

HEPATITIS

A disease characterized by inflammation of the liver.

VIRAL LOAD

The amount of the hepatitis C virus in your blood. Your healthcare provider may test your blood before, during and after treatment to find out your viral load.

Notes

Questions for My Doctor

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/hepatitis

(800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)

Resources

Hepatitis C – General Information

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/HCV/PDFs/HepCGeneralFactSheet.pdf>

Hepatitis C – Information on Testing & Diagnosis

<https://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/hcv/index.htm>

Northern Kentucky Health Department

<https://nkyhealth.org/individual-or-family/individual-health/addiction-response/hepatitis-c/>

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