HEPATITIS C
Screening, Diagnosis and Linkage to Care
Screening
Your first step to finding out if you have hepatitis C is getting screened. Do not wait until you feel sick to get tested.

Diagnosis
If your hepatitis C antibody test is positive or reactive, a second test is needed to diagnose and determine if you are currently infected.

Linkage to Care
Once you learn that you are infected with the hepatitis C virus, it is important for you to receive proper medical care.
Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV can range from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness. HCV can be described as “acute,” meaning a new infection or “chronic,” meaning lifelong infection. Eighty percent of acute HCV infections become chronic infections.

Many people with hepatitis C do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. If symptoms do occur, they could include fatigue, fever, nausea, decreased appetite, muscle or joint pain, dark urine, grey-colored stool, and yellow skin and eyes.

HCV is spread by contact with infected blood. Today, most people become infected by sharing needles or other equipment to prepare or inject drugs. People born from 1945–1965, sometimes referred to as baby boomers, are five times more likely to have hepatitis C than other adults.

Hepatitis C can cause serious liver damage, including cirrhosis and liver cancer. It is the number one reason for liver transplants in the United States.

Liver damage from hepatitis C can be prevented by early diagnosis and timely access to care and treatment. Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C; however, hepatitis C is treatable and curable!
Who is at risk for HCV infection?

People who are at increased risk for HCV infection:

- Current or former injection drug users, including those who injected only once many years ago.
- Recipients of clotting factor concentrates made before 1987, when less advanced methods for manufacturing those products were used.
- Recipients of blood transfusions or solid organ transplants prior to July 1992, before better testing of blood donors became available.
- Chronic hemodialysis patients.
- People with HIV infection.
- People with known exposures to HCV, such as:
  - Health care workers after needle sticks involving HCV-positive blood.
  - Recipients of blood or organs from a donor who tested HCV-positive.
  - Children born to HCV-positive mothers.
Hepatitis C Antibody Test

The first test to determine if you have hepatitis C is a hepatitis C antibody test. This is a blood test that looks for antibodies to the hepatitis C virus (HCV). The test can be done by collecting a blood sample and sending it to a lab, or by a finger stick using a hepatitis C rapid antibody test. The hepatitis C antibody test will tell if you have ever been infected with hepatitis C. This will NOT tell you if you have hepatitis C now. You need a second test to know if you are currently infected.

A hepatitis C antibody test result can be either Non-Reactive/Negative or Reactive/Positive.

- **Non-reactive or negative** antibody test means that you are not currently infected with HCV. However, if you engaged in risky behavior in the last six months such as sharing injection drug equipment in the past, you will need to be tested again.

- **Reactive or positive** antibody test means that you have antibodies to hepatitis C in your blood. You have been exposed to hepatitis C at one time. You may currently be infected with hepatitis C. You will need the second test to know for sure.
People should get tested for hepatitis C include anyone who:

- Share needles, syringes or other equipment to prepare or inject drugs.
- Needle stick injuries in health care settings.
- Are born to a mother who has hepatitis C.
- Born from 1945 through 1965 – baby boomers
- Are HIV positive

Less commonly, a person can also HCV through:

- Shared personal care items that may have come in contact with another person’s blood, such as razors or toothbrushes.
- Have sexual contact with a person infected with HCV.
- Have a tattoo or body piercing in an unregulated setting.
If your hepatitis C antibody test is *reactive*, a second test is needed to diagnose and determine if you are currently infected.

This second test is called an HCV RNA or HCV PCR test. The RNA test checks for the presence or amount of hepatitis C virus in your blood. An HCV RNA test result can either be *undetectable* or *detectable*. Sometimes the result is also reported as a viral load (the amount of virus in your blood).

- **An undetectable test** result means you don’t have virus in your blood and are not currently infected.

- **A detectable test result** means that you have HCV in your blood and that you are currently infected with hepatitis C. This test result may also show your viral load.
Benefits of Early Diagnosis of Hepatitis C
Getting diagnosed early and medical monitoring are key to better health outcomes. Even without treatment, there's a lot you can do to stay healthy and protect your liver from damage:

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle, which is important for everyone, is even more important for someone who has chronic hepatitis C.

Things to do:
- See your health care provider for regular check ups.
- Keep or reach a healthy weight.
- If you are diabetic, control your blood sugar.
- Control the amount of salt and fat you eat.
- Ask your health care provider before taking any prescription, over-the-counter medications, supplements or vitamins.
- Stick to your recommended treatment plan.
- Keep an active lifestyle and exercise.
- Make sure you are vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.
- Build a support team that may include your family, friends, and health care providers.
- DO NOT drink alcohol.
Minimize Risk of Transmission to Others

- If you inject illegal drugs, the best choice is to stop. If you are going to inject drugs, do it as safely as you can. Do not share needles or any other injection equipment (syringes, cotton, cooker, water, etc.).
- Do not share personal care items that may have blood on them such as razors, toothbrushes or nail clippers.
- Do not donate blood, tissue or semen.
- Practice safer sex by using condoms or dental dams. Avoid sex with blood exposure or tearing of tissues.

Hepatitis C is **NOT** spread through casual contact such as sneezing, coughing, hugging and sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses.
Linkage to Care

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C infection is treated with antiviral medications intended to clear the virus from your body. The goal of treatment is to have no hepatitis C virus detected in your body at least 12 weeks after you complete treatment.

Throughout treatment your health care provider will monitor your response to medications. They can also give you advice on how to take care of your liver and information on hepatitis C treatments including your plan of care.

When treated successfully, the virus can be eliminated from your body. It’s important to note that even if you are successfully treated, you are not protected from getting re-infected with hepatitis C in the future.
What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

Medications currently available for the treatment of hepatitis C are more successful, have fewer side effects than in recent years. The treatment for hepatitis C virus infection has evolved substantially since the introduction of therapies in 2011. Since that time new drugs with different mechanisms of action have become available.

Over 90% of HCV infected persons can be cured of hepatitis C infection with 8-12 weeks of oral therapy.

*Updated guidelines for the management of hepatitis C (AASLD-IDSA, 2016): “Treatment is recommended for all patients with chronic HCV infection, except those with short life expectancies that cannot be remediated by treating HCV, by transplantation, or by other directed therapy…recent and active injection drug use is not an absolute contraindication to hepatitis C therapy.”*
Treatment

- The decision about starting treatment for hepatitis C is based on many factors. Together, you and your doctor can decide whether treatment is right for you.

- Hepatitis C infection is treated with medications that will clear the virus from your body. They are known as antiviral medications. The goal of treatment is to have no hepatitis C virus detected in your body at least 12 weeks after you have finished the treatment.
Treatment

- Researchers have recently made a lot of progress in the treatment for hepatitis C using new, "direct-acting" antiviral medications, sometimes in combination with existing ones. As a result, people have better outcomes, fewer side effects and shorter treatment time. The choice of medications and length of your treatment depends on the hepatitis C genotype, presence of existing liver damage, other medical conditions and prior treatments.

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

- Throughout treatment your health care team will watch how your body responds to medications.
For more information on hepatitis C or to get tested, contact the health center most convenient for you. All centers are open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. Same day appointments are available.

**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

NKY Health offers a variety of services for all Northern Kentuckians. Kentucky Medicaid is accepted. If you are uninsured, some services are on a sliding-fee scale based on your income. That means the amount you pay is based on your income and family size. **No one will be denied service because of inability to pay.**

**Resources**
kynect allows Kentucky’s 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/](https://kynect.ky.gov/)

Visit the Kentucky Health Benefit Exchange at  
[https://healthbenefitexchange.ky.gov/Pages/index.aspx](https://healthbenefitexchange.ky.gov/Pages/index.aspx)

For local help, including one-on-one meetings, to assist with signing up for medical benefits, contact the Northern Kentucky Community Action Commission (NKCAC). The website is  
[https://www.nkcac.org/](https://www.nkcac.org/)

Northern Kentucky Health Department, Linkage to Care Coordinator, Susan Guthier, RN, BSN  
(phone) 859-363-2090  
(cell) 859-279-5375

For resources on substance use treatment, visit [https://findhelpnowky.org/ky](https://findhelpnowky.org/ky), or 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).
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 three 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.
Questions for my health care provider

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References

Center for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov/hepatitis
(800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)

Adapted from New York State Department of Health