

HIV and Hepatitis C Coinfection

What is HIV?

HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, is a virus that attacks your immune system. It is the virus that causes AIDS.

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an infection that damages your liver. It is caused by a virus called the hepatitis C virus, or HCV for short.

What is HIV/hepatitis C co-infection?

Co-infection is a medical term meaning that you have 2 or more infections in your body at the same time. If you have HIV and hepatitis C co-infection, then you have both the HIV and hepatitis C viruses. These two illnesses are very different, so it is important that you learn about both of them.

What do I need to know about HIV?

HIV is passed from person to person mainly through sex and through contact with infected blood. You can have HIV and have no symptoms for a long time. Over the years, however, the virus wears down your body's immune system, making it hard for your body to fight off dangerous infections and certain cancers. Unfortunately, there is no cure yet for HIV, but there are excellent treatments that can control HIV and help you live a long and healthy life. It is important to learn as much as you can about it, so you can do everything possible to stay healthy, keep your immune system strong, and avoid passing HIV to others.

What do I need to know about hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is mainly passed from person to person through contact with infected blood. Most people with hepatitis C infection have no symptoms at all, while some experience only mild symptoms such as feeling tired. Most patients are diagnosed because they have a risk factor for hepatitis C, rather than experiencing symptoms.

Even if you do not have any symptoms, hepatitis C is a serious illness. Over time, if untreated, it can cause other health problems, such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer. With proper treatment, most people can be cured of hepatitis C.

Can having HIV make hepatitis C worse?

Yes. HIV affects your body's ability to fight off hepatitis C. As a result, liver damage from hepatitis C may happen sooner if you also have HIV. Therefore, both cirrhosis and liver cancer can develop at a younger age if you have both hepatitis C and HIV.

What do I need to know about HIV, hepatitis C, and sex?

Both infections can be passed to another person through sex, though HIV is more easily transmitted this way. For people with HIV, the best ways to keep sex partners from getting HIV are by both taking your medications as prescribed and using condoms correctly and consistently. People with HIV and hepatitis C co-infection should always use condoms or other latex barriers.

What do I need to know about HIV, hepatitis C, and drug use?

Sharing needles, syringes, or any equipment used to inject drugs is one of the easiest ways to spread HIV and hepatitis C. By sharing needles or works, you can even spread both of these viruses at the same time. The best thing to do, especially if you have HIV or hepatitis C, is to not use drugs. If you use drugs, make sure that your needles and injecting equipment are clean (or brand new) every time and never share them with anyone else. Talk to your VA provider about getting help to stop using drugs and about Syringe Services Programs in your area.



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Is there a cure for hepatitis C?

Yes, we have very safe and effective treatments that can cure hepatitis C. Older drugs such as interferon and ribavirin are no longer used. Current treatment includes taking pills by mouth only. Having HIV will not decrease your chance of being cured of hepatitis C.

Is there a cure for HIV?

Unfortunately, there is currently no cure for HIV. However, there are very safe and effective medications available that can keep HIV under control and keep your immune system strong.

What can I do to slow down my HIV and hepatitis C infections?

The best way to keep your co-infection from becoming a serious health problem is to keep yourself and your liver healthy by following these guidelines:

- ▶ **Speak with your provider about treatments for both HIV and hepatitis C.**

Controlling HIV and curing hepatitis C are both extremely important, and will help to keep your liver healthy and your immune system strong.

- ▶ **Do not drink alcohol.**

Alcohol weakens your immune system and damages your liver even when you are healthy. When you have HIV and hepatitis C, drinking alcohol, even small amounts, can make the damage to your liver much worse. It doesn't help to switch from "hard" liquor to beer, cider, or wine. If you need help to stop drinking alcohol, talk to your provider.

- ▶ **Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B and review your vaccination history with your provider.**

Having hepatitis C does not mean that you can't get other kinds of hepatitis. You should be vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B, unless you already are immune. Review your vaccination history with your provider to make sure you have received and are up to date with all of the recommended vaccines

- ▶ **Avoid taking medicines, supplements, or natural or herbal remedies that might cause more damage to your liver or interact with your HIV medications.**

Even ordinary pain relievers can cause liver problems in some people. Check with your provider before you take any natural or herbal remedy, supplement, prescription, or non-prescription medicine. And, make sure your health care provider knows all the medicines you are taking for HIV and hepatitis C.

Will having hepatitis C prevent me from getting treated for HIV?

No. Both HIV and hepatitis C can be safely treated in co-infected patients. The timing of therapy for both HIV and HCV will be determined by your HIV provider.

Will having HIV prevent me from getting treated for hepatitis C?

No. Hepatitis C can be safely treated in patients who have HIV. Your HIV provider will choose a regimen that is individualized for you because there are important drug interactions with some HIV medications.

Healthy living tips.

Having HIV or hepatitis C alone is difficult enough. Finding out that you have both at the same time might seem overwhelming. Here are some things that can help:

- ▶ **Take care of your body.**

Eat healthy food, drink plenty of water, and get restful sleep. Try to exercise every day.

- ▶ **Don't use drugs, drink alcohol, or have sex without condoms.**

Remember that drugs and alcohol can make your illness worse. If you have sex without condoms you may pass HIV and hepatitis C to others. Talk with your provider if you are having difficulty with this.

- ▶ **Get support.**

If you need mental health support or are interested in a support group, talk to your provider for information on how to access these services locally.

- ▶ **Stay informed.**

HIV and hepatitis C are important medical issues. Try to educate yourself about them. Ask your provider if you need help making sense of anything you hear on the news or read in the newspaper or on the internet.

- ▶ **Follow your provider's advice.**

Follow all instructions you get from your provider. Try to keep all of your appointments. Call your provider immediately if you have any problems.

For more information on HIV and hepatitis C:

Visit: www.hepatitis.va.gov and www.hiv.va.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):
www.cdc.gov/hepatitis and www.cdc.gov/hiv