

Should you get tested for hepatitis C?

By Debbie Brown

Hepatitis C is a complex disease that often has no symptoms until the infected person becomes seriously ill with cirrhosis or liver cancer. The only way to know if you have hepatitis C is to get tested.

This disease affects Montanans and Yellowstone County has the highest number of infections. More than 230 Yellowstone County people tested positive for hepatitis C last year. Slightly more men than women are diagnosed here. Most hepatitis C cases aren't diagnosed until the disease is chronic, which means the person has been infected for many months or years.

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a viral infection that spreads through contact with the blood of an infected person. The most common mode of transmission is sharing needles, syringes or other paraphernalia used in drug preparation and injection. About 6% of infants born to infected mothers acquire hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C can spread during sex. It has been reported more often among men who have sex with men. Another mode of transmission is through tattoos or body piercings in unlicensed facilities or informal setups. Sharing personal items like glucose monitors, razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, and other objects that may have come into contact with infected blood – even in minuscule amounts – poses a risk.

An infected person who has no symptoms can still spread hepatitis C to others.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends getting tested for hepatitis C if you are:

- 18 years of age and older (get tested at least once in your lifetime)
- Pregnant (get tested during each pregnancy)
- Currently inject drugs (get tested regularly)
- Have ever injected drugs, even if it was just once or many years ago
- Have HIV
- Have been exposed to blood from a person who has hepatitis C
- Were born to a mother with hepatitis C

Unlike hepatitis A and hepatitis B, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. The best prevention is to avoid infection risks. The best way to prevent serious illness from infection is to get tested – even if you have no symptoms.

Free HCV testing is available at RiverStone Health RISE Clinic, 123 S. 27th St. Testing hours are 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Tuesdays and noon to 4 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays. RISE offers a finger-stick test and provides results in about 20 minutes.

You can find other testing options at GetTested.MT.gov.

If you test positive, treatment can be started right away. FDA-approved treatments usually involve 8–12 weeks of pills and cure more than 90% with few side effects.

As we strive for better health outcomes, understanding the nuances of hep C, its transmission, and the potential consequences is vital. Through increased screening, awareness campaigns, and access to effective treatment, we can work towards reducing the burden of hepatitis C.

Debbie Brown, SWLC, ACLC, RiverStone Health manager for Health Provision, can be reached at 406-247-3324.