HEPATITIS C VIRUS (HCV)

What is Hepatitis C Virus (HCV)?

- Hepatitis is an inflammation (swelling or tenderness) of the liver.

- Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is the most common form of viral hepatitis and usually causes a chronic, long-term infection lasting months or years before diagnosis.

- Symptoms of HCV are often like the flu and not too harsh.

- Many people with HCV don’t have any symptoms at all, which means they do not know they are infected and may unknowingly spread the infection to other folks.

- There are options to treat, and now cure, HCV.

- HCV can be acute or chronic.
  - Acute means that it is a short-term illness (less than six months). Acute HCV can lead to chronic HCV.
  - Chronic means it is a long-term illness where the virus stays in your body and can last a lifetime.
If inflammation of the liver lasts at least six months or longer, it is called chronic HCV.
- Chronic hepatitis C can lead to scarring of the liver, also known as cirrhosis. Cirrhosis can lead to liver failure if not controlled.

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV at this time.

About 3.5 million people in the U.S. have chronic HCV.

People born from 1945–1965 are five times more likely to have HCV.
- If you were born within this time frame, talk to your doctor about getting tested.

How Does Hepatitis C Spread?

- HCV is spread through a carrier, which is someone who has the virus in his or her blood.
  - A carrier may or may not have symptoms of HCV.
- Since the virus is in the blood, it can spread through exposure to blood or, rarely, bodily fluids of a carrier. This can happen through:
  - IV drug use.
  - Contaminated needles.
  - Being born to a mother with HCV.

The Liver

- The liver is one of the most important organs in your body.
- It weighs about three pounds.
- It sits in the upper right side of the torso, below the ribs.
- The liver:
  - Makes bile.
  - Cleans alcohol and poisons from your system.
  - Stores certain vitamins, minerals, sugars and iron.
  - Filters and detoxifies chemicals in what you eat, breathe and absorb through the skin.
  - Regulates fat stores and controls the making and release of cholesterol.
  - Kills poisonous substances.
  - Changes the food you eat into energy, clotting factors, immune factors, hormones and proteins.
  - Breaks down drugs and medications.
Less often, it can be spread through:

- High-risk sexual behavior (especially if you are HIV positive).
  - Women with HCV should avoid sex during menstruation.
- Sharing personal care items that could have a carrier’s blood, such as razors, toothbrushes, communal tattoo needles and unsterilized manicure and pedicure tools.

**Note:** Prior to 1992, there was no screening of HCV at blood banks and it was more common to spread through blood transfusions. Blood banks now screen blood to ensure the safety of the blood supply. This has greatly reduced the number of HCV cases from transfusions.

**HCV is not spread through:**

- Sharing eating utensils.
- Food or water.
- Breastfeeding.
- Coughing or sneezing.
- Touching, such as hugging, kissing or holding hands.

**Who Is at Risk for Hepatitis C?**

- Injection-drug users (past or current).
- People who received donated blood or organs before 1992 (when screening for HCV began).
- People who received clotting factor concentrates before 1987.
- People who are on long-term hemodialysis.
- Health workers who may get a needle stick from HCV-positive blood.
- Children born to HCV-positive mothers.
- People who get a tattoo in an unregulated setting.

- Patients with HIV.
  - Co-infection of HCV in patients who are HIV positive is common.
  - About one-quarter of patients who have HIV also have HCV.
  - About 50 to 90 percent of HIV-infected injection-drug users also have HCV.
  - HCV virus infection is worse in patients with HIV.