



## PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

### ADVISORY CONCERNING HEPATITIS C

The Tennessee Department of Health warns of a recent increase in the rate of Hepatitis C infection and advises residents to learn more about this life-threatening disease, and to consider being tested for chronic Hepatitis C infection. Hepatitis C is an infection caused by the Hepatitis C virus. **There has been a nationwide increase in Hepatitis C infections, and the largest increases have been in the Appalachian region.** A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report<sup>1</sup> (issued May 8, 2015) shows Hepatitis C is the most common blood-borne infection in the United States, with approximately three million people living with the infection.

**Hepatitis C is spread by direct contact with the blood of someone else who is already infected.** The most prevalent method of transmission for Hepatitis C is sharing of needles and syringes among intravenous drug users. It is not spread by casual contact.

**Once infected with Hepatitis C, some people will recover fully, but most (70%–85%) will develop long-term (or chronic) infection.** A Hepatitis C test will reveal if a person has been exposed to Hepatitis C in the past. It does not automatically mean the person is currently infected. A confirmatory test can determine if a person is chronically infected with Hepatitis C.

Early symptoms of Hepatitis C infection can include fatigue, abdominal pain, itching and dark urine. However, **many people are not aware they have Hepatitis C until the virus has already caused liver damage.** If Chronic Hepatitis C is confirmed, a person's physician can prescribe antiviral treatment. The treatment is currently expensive. It is usually, but not always, successful. Treated persons can be re-infected.

**There is no vaccine to prevent Hepatitis C,** so efforts to avoid exposure to infected blood are most important in preventing the disease. Most of the increase in transmission of Hepatitis C in Tennessee is due to sharing of contaminated needles, and most of the drugs associated with this needle sharing are legal or illegal pain medicines. The best way to prevent Hepatitis C infection is to avoid recreational use of pain medicines, to avoid injecting drugs, and to not let those you love become dependent on or inject pain medicines or other illicit drugs like heroin and methamphetamines.

The department has developed a list of **frequently asked questions and answers** regarding appropriate action to reduce risk this area under the law in Tennessee. To see it, visit <http://tn.gov/health/article/health-advisories>.

**If you believe you are at risk, seek testing.** The CDC recommends all individuals born from 1945 to 1965 be tested, as well as individuals of any age who have any specific risk factor (including a history of injection drug use). If Chronic Hepatitis C infection is present, discuss treatment options with your doctor. The sooner an infection is identified and a person is evaluated for treatment, the better a person's chances are for long-term health and recovery.

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<sup>1</sup> To see the complete report, visit [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/wk/mm6417.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/wk/mm6417.pdf).