

Hepatitis C treatment has come a long way

Recent reports from the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are again raising awareness of hepatitis C.

A [2022 report](#) found “too few people diagnosed with hepatitis C are being treated, despite availability of medications capable of curing this viral infection.” Specifically, the agency estimates fewer than one in three people with health insurance are getting direct-acting antiviral treatment for the infection within a year of diagnosis. A [June 2023 study](#) published by the CDC also examined gaps in access to treatment, building on the 2022 findings.

The statistics resonate with [Marcie Lindstrom](#), a gastroenterology advanced practice provider at OSF HealthCare.

“If we go back 10 or 15 years, hepatitis C treatment was really difficult,” Lindstrom notes as a possible reason for the hesitancy. “Treatment lasted a year or a year and a half. It required an injection. People really felt bad during treatment.”

Conversely: “Treatment today is so easy. It’s completed in as little as eight weeks. It’s a pill. No more injections,” Lindstrom says.

The basics

Lindstrom says hepatitis – whether A, B, C, D or E – describes inflammation of the liver. She says hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus, and doctors over the years have settled on some common ways it spreads:

- A blood transfusion prior to 1992. Prior to that time, screening blood donors for diseases was not reliable.
- A tattoo or piercing at a place that’s not regulated
- Men who have unprotected sexual relations with men
- People who use illegal drugs, either through a needle injection or snorting through the nose

“Often people are at parties and sharing a straw or dollar bill to ingest. There are a lot of blood capillaries inside the nose. Those can break open,” and blood can spread, Lindstrom says.

Lindstrom calls hepatitis C a silent ailment due to a lack of symptoms.

“Many people can have hepatitis C for decades before they become aware of it,” she says.

Even worse, when a person does have symptoms, they may be vague and tough to distinguish from everyday problems. Fatigue and body aches are common complaints.

Often, Lindstrom says a provider discovers hepatitis C after a person comes in for some routine bloodwork. The bloodwork may come back showing elevated liver enzymes, and a test specifically for hepatitis – also a simple blood test – would then be done.

But if you have any hepatitis C risk factors, you should talk to your health care provider about when you need to be screened. A provider may recommend a screening once a year. And generally, federal guidelines say all adults should be screened for hepatitis C once in their life, and all pregnant women should be tested during each pregnancy. Ask your provider about it when you’re younger rather than older, Lindstrom pleads.

Why it’s important

Untreated hepatitis C can lead to liver scarring known as cirrhosis. That means fewer cells doing their daily functions, which, in turn, can lead to liver failure, liver cancer and even death.

“That’s why treatment is important. We don’t want people to progress to getting cirrhosis,” Lindstrom says. “If they take their eight to 12 weeks of treatment and don’t have a lot of scarring, we have a high success rate in clearing the virus – 98 to 100%.”

Learn more

Read more about gastroenterology care on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).