

Infection Prevention and You



Hepatitis C screening for baby boomers

If you were born during 1945-1965, talk to your doctor about getting tested for hepatitis C. The word “hepatitis” means swelling of the liver. Hepatitis is most often caused by a virus. In the United States, the most common type of viral hepatitis is hepatitis C. Hepatitis C is primarily spread through contact with blood from an infected person. More than 15,000 Americans, most of them baby boomers, die each year from hepatitis C-related illness. Deaths related to hepatitis C have been on the rise and are expected to increase. Hepatitis C is a leading cause of liver cancer and the leading reason for liver transplants.

Other serious health problems related to hepatitis C include:

- Liver damage
- Cirrhosis
- Liver failure

The reason that baby boomers have the highest rates of hepatitis C is not completely understood. Most boomers may have become infected in the 1970s and 1980s when rates of hepatitis C were the highest. Many baby boomers could have gotten infected from tainted blood and blood products before testing of the blood supply began in 1992. Others may have become infected from injecting drugs, even if only once in the past. Still, many baby boomers do not know how or when they were infected.

People born during 1945 through 1965 are five times more likely than other adults to be infected. In fact, 75 percent of adults with hepatitis C were born in these years. People with hepatitis C often have no symptoms and can live for decades without feeling sick. As baby boomers grow older, there is a greater chance that they will develop life-threatening liver disease from hepatitis C.

Risk factors for hepatitis infection include:

- History of blood transfusions or other blood products (before July 1992)
- Organ transplant before widespread testing for HIV and hepatitis (before July 1992)
- Long-term dialysis treatment
- Exposure to hepatitis C such as through a healthcare setting (healthcare needle sticks)
- Infection with HIV, the AIDS virus
- Children born to mothers who have hepatitis C
- Any past use of injected illegal drugs
- Having received a tattoo with needles that were not properly disinfected

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The only way to know if you have hepatitis C is to get tested. Early detection can save lives. There is a simple blood test to determine if a person has ever been infected with the hepatitis C virus. It is estimated that one-time testing of everyone born during 1945 through 1965 will prevent more than 120,000 deaths.

There are no vaccines to prevent hepatitis C. Many people who have been diagnosed with hepatitis C can be successfully treated with medications called antivirals. Two new medicines are now available (telaprevir and boceprevir), that when added to the standard treatment can increase the effectiveness and shorten treatment time for many people. For many people, medical treatment can result in clearing hepatitis C from the bloodstream. Talk to your doctor about getting tested—**it could save your life!**

Additional resources:

<http://www.cdc.gov/knowmorehepatitis/HepC-FAQ.htm>

<http://www.cdc.gov/features/HepatitisCTesting/index.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/RiskAssessment/> (Take a quiz to find out if you're at risk for hepatitis C)

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