



American Correctional Officer

We've Got Your Back

HEALTH ALERT

February 12, 2010

Dear Brother and Sister Officer and Corrections Professional,

As a correctional officer and supporter of American Correctional Officer, you have been trained to take precautions in your job. Working “behind the walls” can be dangerous at times. Every year, correctional officers are injured in confrontations with inmates. But that is not the only way you may be put at risk. We would like you to take precautions to stay healthy, too. That is why you have received this letter in our ongoing Living Well series. It is about hepatitis C and ways you can avoid getting it. Hepatitis C is an infectious disease that you may be exposed to through your work.

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease that causes the liver to become inflamed (swollen). When the tissues in your body are injured or infected, inflammation occurs. When the liver becomes inflamed, it does not work properly.

Hepatitis C is caused by a virus. Some people are able to recover from the virus in a few months. But in most cases, hepatitis C infections become chronic. This means that the body can't get rid of the infection. If it is not treated, hepatitis C can cause serious problems. These include scarring of the liver (called cirrhosis [sur-RO-siss]), liver cancer, or liver failure.

How do people get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is spread from one person to another through blood. A person can get hepatitis C by:

- Being born to a mother with hepatitis C
- Having sex with a person with hepatitis C
- Being tattooed or pierced with tools that were used on an infected person and were not sterilized
- Accidentally being stuck with a needle that was used on an infected person
- Using the razor or toothbrush of an infected person
- Sharing drug needles with an infected person

A person *cannot* get hepatitis C from casual contact, such as shaking hands, hugging, or sitting next to an infected person.

Think about the inmates you interact with on a daily basis. How many of the risk factors listed above do you see in the prison population? Possibly all of them, to some degree. Depending on the prison system, between 16% and 41% of inmates have hepatitis C. That is why it is so important to protect yourself from this disease.

How do you know if you have hepatitis C?

Most people do not show signs of hepatitis C for several years. By that time, their livers may already be damaged. Other people may show one or more of these symptoms earlier:

- Yellowish eyes or skin (called *jaundice* [JAWN-diss])
- Easy bruising
- Bleeding that lasts longer than it should
- Swollen stomach or ankles
- Tiredness
- Upset stomach
- Fever
- Lack of appetite
- Diarrhea, light-colored stool, or dark yellow urine

If you have any of these symptoms, talk to your doctor. A simple blood test can tell if you have contracted hepatitis C.

Staying focused and attentive on the job helps protect you from hazards you may encounter. Good judgment and quick thinking are important tools for staying safe and healthy. Those skills are just as important in protecting yourself from health hazards, such as hepatitis C.

If you choose not to receive this important Living Well information, please contact ACO/ACOIN and we will have you removed from these Living Well messages. Should you be an ACOIN member and you ask to be removed from list your membership will not be affected and you will remain current and in good standing. We hope these ALERTS will help to keep you and your families healthy and safe. Please copy this ALERT and distribute it at your facility and send them to everyone on your corrections email list. Thank you,

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