You’ve been given this fact sheet from your medical provider because you’re getting a hepatitis C (HCV) test. This is a very important step for you in terms of taking care of your health. This sheet will help to explain the testing process and results.

People who inject drugs (PWID) should get tested for hepatitis C routinely. If you have never shared a syringe, cooker, cotton, water or other injecting equipment (“works”), then your risk for HCV isn’t any different than it is for someone who doesn’t inject drugs. But this is hard to do: Sometimes you don’t have your own works and have to share or sometimes you get your works mixed up with someone else’s, and so on. It’s better to be safe than sorry, so testing at least once a year is recommended. You may want to do it every 6 months.

**How do they do the HCV testing?**

Hepatitis C testing can be pretty complicated. It’s a two-step process: First, you take an HCV antibody test; and second, if the antibody test is positive, you take an HCV viral load test (also called HCV RNA or HCV PCR) to confirm that you are chronically infected with HCV.

The most important thing to remember here is this: If you test positive on the HCV antibody test, you have to confirm it with that viral load test.

If you’re told “you are positive for hepatitis C because you tested positive for the antibody test,” then you should follow up with the question “Are you sure? Did you confirm that antibody result with an HCV viral load?” If they didn’t do a viral load test, ask for one.

**Why are the two types of tests?**

If you get infected with HCV, in response your body will make antibodies (protein from your immune system). You’ll have these antibodies for the rest of your life. The thing that’s important to remember: Some people clear the virus within 6 months of infection, that is, there is no more virus in your body doing damage to your liver. This happens about 25% of the time (1 out of 4 people). When someone clears the virus, you will test positive for the antibodies, but not have the virus in you! Therefore, to know if you’re chronically infected or not, you need to confirm that positive antibody test with a viral load test.

**Hepatitis C testing and prevention**

1. Hepatitis C testing:
   - What you need to know

**HEPATITIS TERMINOLOGY**

**Acute Hepatitis C:**
This is defined as the first 6 months of infection. There is a chance for a person to clear the virus naturally during this time.

**Chronic Hepatitis C:**
This is when a person has had it for 6 months or longer. Hepatitis C won’t go away on its own once it becomes chronic, but you can get cured of it and get rid of it that way.
HCV Antibody Testing

- The HCV antibody test will come up either negative or positive.
- There is a rapid test for HCV antibodies: It’s a finger-stick and you can get your results in 20 minutes. There is also a blood test where you can get results in a couple of days (maybe up to a week).
- If you test HCV antibody negative, you probably don’t have it, but there is period of time—called the “window period”—where your body needs some time to make those antibodies.
- The HCV antibody window period is 6 months. Most people will develop antibodies in the first 12 weeks after an exposure to the virus, but to be absolutely sure, you need the full 6 months. The following chart can help visualize it:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JANUARY 1</th>
<th>FEBRUARY 1</th>
<th>MARCH 1</th>
<th>APRIL 1</th>
<th>MAY 1</th>
<th>JUNE 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 0</td>
<td>1 month</td>
<td>2 months</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>exposed to HCV</td>
<td>waiting</td>
<td>waiting</td>
<td>HCV antibody negative</td>
<td>waiting</td>
<td>waiting</td>
<td>HCV antibody negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This person tested negative for the antibodies 6 months out from the day they were exposed to HCV, so they’re not infected and do not have it.

HCV Viral Load Testing

- If you test HCV antibody positive, the next step is to get a viral load test to confirm if you are chronically infected with HCV.
- If you are antibody positive, but viral load negative, then you’ve cleared the virus.
- If you are antibody positive, and viral load positive, then you have it chronically until you are cured.

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>exposed to HCV, antibody negative</td>
<td>waiting</td>
<td>waiting</td>
<td>HCV antibody positive, viral load positive</td>
<td>waiting</td>
<td>waiting</td>
<td>HCV antibody positive, viral load negative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This person was infected with HCV, but cleared the virus within the first 6 months of infection, so they’re HCV negative and do not have the virus.

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</tr>
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</table>

This person was infected with HCV, did not clear the virus within the 6 months, and is HCV positive with chronic infection.
How often should you test for HCV?

If you’re at risk for HCV, it’s a good idea to test at least once a year. You could go shorter, too: A test every 3 to 6 months could help you find out if you have HCV as soon as possible. Testing more often isn’t a way to prevent hep C, but it will give you good information so you can take care of your liver immediately and prevent transmitting it to others.

If I test hep C negative, what are my next steps?

If you test negative for hep C, then you most likely don’t have it. Again, though: Knowing the 6-month window period for the time it takes to make antibodies will help here. If you had a blood exposure within the last 3-6 months — with a known hep C positive person or even someone whose status you don’t know — you will likely need to test again once you’re outside of that window. Talk with your medical provider or HCV test counselor about this, and plan to do a follow-up test at a later date.

If you test hep C negative and you’re outside the window period, there are several things you can do to minimize your risk of infection going forward. This list is not exhaustive. For more information, read the PDFs at www.projectinform.org/pwidtoolkit.

If I test hep C positive, what are my next steps?

If you test hep C positive, there are several things you can do to deal with it. First, talk to your medical provider about your next steps.
and how to stay as healthy as possible while living with it.

This is very important: There are some people who do not believe a person who uses drugs should be treated for hepatitis C. There are definitely some insurance plans—both public and private—that have restrictions against people who have recently used drugs from accessing treatment without a period of abstinence. There is no evidence to support this, and while it may be tough to beat these restrictions, don’t assume you won’t get treatment if you’re still using. It’s worth trying. Call HELP-4-HEP (877-435-7443) and talk with a counselor about this.

Next, take a little time to learn more about hepatitis C. You might want to find a support group, read educational materials, talk with a health educator or call the HELP-4-HEP support line (877-435-7443). Check out the [insert resources fact sheet link here] for information on where to get good information.

Here are a few things you can do to stay healthier with hep C:

1. Quit or reduce alcohol intake.
   Quitting is best, as alcohol and hep C do not mix well. Alcohol speeds up liver damage from hep C. But quitting alcohol can be hard (and in some cases, deadly if you’re alcohol dependent), so get the support you need to cut it down and work towards quitting entirely and safely when you’re ready.

2. Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.
   Getting another hepatitis virus can be really hard on your liver. You may have already been vaccinated against these two viruses, but check with your medical provider to make sure.

3. Drink coffee.
   Yes, coffee! Coffee is good for the liver overall, and it’s been shown to help people with hepatitis C by slowing down liver damage. Drink 2 cups a day. If you can’t sleep, try drinking it earlier in the day.

4. Drink lots of water and eat as healthy as you can.
   Drink 8-10 glasses of water each day. For food, cut down on your fat intake and look for foods that are low in fats, sodium and sugar, too. Eating fruits and vegetables, and whole grains are good, too. Do your best—getting healthy food can be tough.

5. Watch out for too much acetaminophen.
   Too much acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be hard on a healthy liver, let alone a hep C infected one. Check the labels of over-the-counter medications or other prescribed medications (including anything you might get from a friend) because acetaminophen can be found in over 600 different medications. Make sure your medical provider knows what you’re taking and ask if it’s safe for your liver before you start something new.