What is hepatitis C?
Hepatitis C is a disease that affects your liver. It is caused by a virus called the hepatitis C virus, or HCV for short. According to the government, almost 4 million people in the United States have hepatitis C.

Why should I get tested for hepatitis C?
The symptoms of hepatitis C infection are often very mild. You may not have any symptoms at all. Still, hepatitis C is a serious illness. If you have hepatitis C, it may never go away. Over time, it can cause health problems, such as cirrhosis (or scarring of the liver) and liver cancer. Finally, because it stays in your body, you can give the hepatitis C virus to someone else.

How do I decide if I should get tested for hepatitis C?
Talk with your VA doctor about being tested if
• you ever used a needle to inject drugs, even if it was many years ago;
• you had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992;
• you were a health care worker and had contact with blood on the job;
• you were on long-term kidney dialysis;
• your mother had hepatitis C when she gave birth to you.

In addition, the Veterans Health Administration recommends testing if
• you are a Vietnam-era veteran

What is the test for hepatitis C like?
The test to see if you have hepatitis C is very simple and will only take a few minutes. Your doctor will take a small sample of your blood and send it to a laboratory. You will find out the results in one or two weeks.

Where can I get tested?
Any veteran can get a test for hepatitis C. Call your local VA medical center for an appointment.
If I don’t have hepatitis C infection, can I get a vaccine?
No. There is no vaccine (or shot) that will keep you from getting hepatitis C. There are vaccines that can protect you from other kinds of hepatitis. Ask your doctor for more information.

How can I protect myself from hepatitis C infection?
There are lots of things you can do to protect yourself from hepatitis C infection. The most important thing is to avoid other people’s blood or things that might have other people’s blood on them. Here are some suggestions:

~ Don’t inject drugs.
If you can’t stop, use a clean needle every time, and never share your needle or works with anyone else. Ask your doctor how you can stop using drugs.

~ Practice safe sex.
Use a latex barrier, such as a condom (or rubber), every time you have sex. Talk with your sex partner(s) about hepatitis C and other sexually transmitted diseases.

~ If you are a health care worker, follow standard precautions.
Handle needles and other sharps safely. Report every needle stick or other injury on the job to your supervisor.

~ Don’t share personal items that might have blood on them.
These items include razors, toothbrushes, and personal medical supplies.

~ Talk with your doctor about hepatitis C.
Your doctor can provide you with more information about how to protect yourself from hepatitis C infection.

These suggestions may also help protect you from other diseases, such as HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and HBV (hepatitis B virus). Talk with your doctor if you would like more information about these other viruses.

What are some ways hepatitis C is NOT spread?
Hepatitis C is mainly spread through blood.
You cannot get hepatitis C from
• holding someone’s hand
• hugging or kissing someone
• being coughed or sneezed on
• sharing eating utensils
• sharing food
• eating dirty food
• drinking dirty water
• donating blood

Who can I contact for more information?
Call your local VA medical center and visit the Veterans Affairs Hepatitis C Web site at http://www.hepatitis.va.gov/

Contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Hepatitis Toll-Free Information Line at 1-888-4 HEPCDC (1-888-443-7232) and visit the Web site at http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis