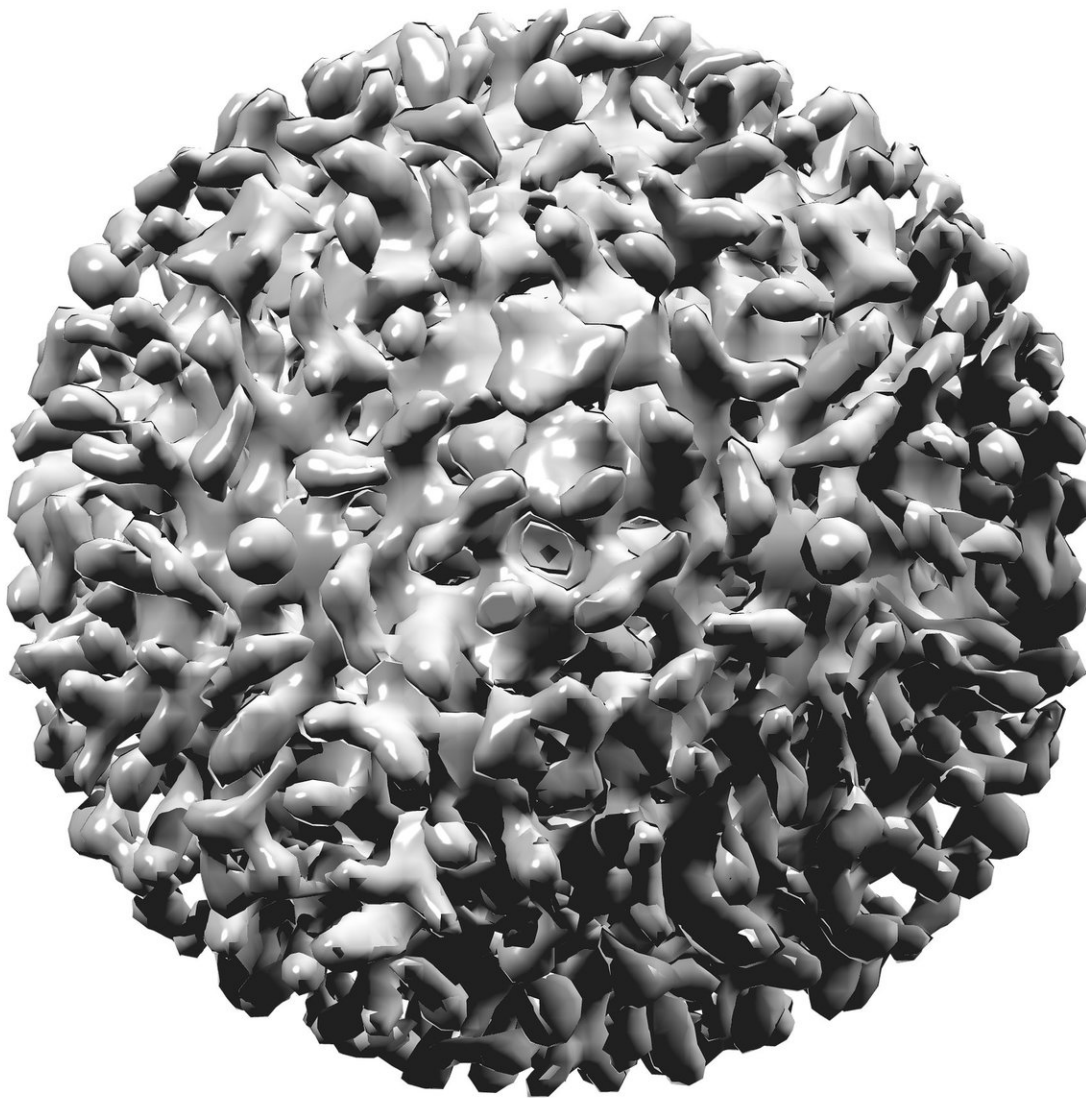


Screening for Hepatitis C can reduce chance of liver disease

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Hepatitis C is a good news, bad news kind of disease. The bad news is that many with the liver-attacking virus may not even know it. The good news is that once discovered, doctors can effectively treat and even remove it.

"We can eliminate the [virus](#) and keep people from developing [liver disease](#)," said Dr. James Spicher, an internal medicine physician at Penn State Health. "But we can only do that if we find it. That's why screening is so important. Otherwise, it's a silent disease."

Unlike hepatitis A, which is contracted through contaminated food or water, or hepatitis B, which spreads through blood, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

The virus causes chronic, low-level inflammation of the liver, which, over time, can lead to scarring, cirrhosis, liver disease or liver cancer. One of the leading causes for liver transplants is liver failure as a result of hepatitis C.

In the past, doctors had very expensive yet semi-effective treatments to offer patients with hepatitis C. Recent years have seen the development of oral antiviral drugs with very few side effects that cure people more than 90 percent of the time.

Spicher said the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends screenings for the 53- to 73-year-old age group because it takes many years—even decades—for the virus to cause noticeable liver damage.

Many who have hepatitis C contracted it through a [blood transfusion](#) or medical procedure prior to when laboratories began screening for the virus in the early 1990s.

People who carry the virus may experience a mild, flu-like illness that lasts for a couple of weeks and then goes away, not realizing that the virus that caused their symptoms still resides in their livers.

That's why the CDC recommends that everyone born between 1945 and 1965 get a single, once-and-done [blood test](#) for the virus as part of their regular lab work when they see their family doctor.

"Those are the people who are most at risk now," Spicher said, adding that 75 percent of those who have been diagnosed with hepatitis C were born during those years. Going forward, he said, "I expect the age group recommendations for screening will probably be expanded."

Spicher said the opioid crisis and heroin users who share needles are causing an increase in new hepatitis C cases in the younger population. The disease is often detected when users come for treatment and are screened for a variety of conditions.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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