The number of people in the United States currently infected with Hepatitis C is triple that of HIV/AIDS, more than five times that of Parkinson's, and more than ten times the number of Americans with multiple sclerosis. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control estimate that 3.9 million Americans have been infected.

Hepatitis C is called the silent epidemic because you can have the virus and not know it. It's unusual to have severe symptoms until the end-stages of liver disease—a process that, if it occurs, may take decades.

Hepatitis C usually progresses slowly, with peaks and valleys of activity. Although it's a serious illness, it's important to keep perspective. We now believe that Hepatitis C becomes chronic in 55-85% of infected people. While it's true that one-third of patients with chronic Hepatitis C may develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), two-thirds may not. One of five people with cirrhosis may also get hepatocellular carcinoma, a form of liver cancer, but four out of five will not. The frustrating problem is that we can't precisely predict outcomes for individual patients.

What is Hepatitis C? Hepatitis C simply means inflammation of the liver. Many injurious agents can cause Hepatitis C, including alcohols, medications, drugs, toxins or viruses. Unfortunately, the public hears so many stories of celebrities who injured their livers with substance abuse that they tend to lump all forms of liver disease together. As anyone with Hepatitis C can tell you, it's not uncommon (although extremely unfair) to be labeled an alcoholic, even if you've never taken a drink.

During the past 30 years, scientists have discovered hepatitis viruses A through G. Each virus has its own ways of infecting people, but its hard for the public to see the differences.

"But I feel fine!" many of my patients say when I tell them that blood tests show they have Hepatitis C. They often follow with, "Are you sure?" All of us, when we hear upsetting news, have the same reaction. A layer of protective denial shelters us from absorbing the news too quickly. We feel almost numb. Then, as our bodies adapt to the increased stress, we start to question. Could there be a mistake?

Although current tests for Hepatitis C are very good, none are perfectly accurate. Every test has a low rate of both false positives and false negatives. Most of the tests for Hepatitis C measure antibodies that your body produces against the virus. Other tests can actually measure the virus itself (RNA), quantitate levels of the virus, and determine the viral subtype.

The name virus evokes fear in people, fear of the unknown, the invisible. Viruses are not visible to the human eye or by standard microscopy; you need an electron microscope to see them. Despite their small size, viruses carry genetic material with enough punch to injure our organs and bodies and even cause death.

Viruses are as old as humankind—possibly older. Archaeologists have unearthed an Egyptian mummy that bears pockmarks, evidence of the smallpox virus thousands of years ago. Among other diseases, viruses cause polio, rubella, chickenpox, herpes, rabies, yellow fever, influenza, measles, mumps, the common cold—and new plagues, such as Ebola and AIDS.

When I finally tell someone I have Hepatitis C, the atmosphere changes. I've had bad people give me this airbrush bandsbake because they don't want to touch me. Or they'll say, "Isn't that what that baseball star had?" Didn't he drink himself to death?" Suddenly, there's this invisible wall.

—Bob, Hepatitis C patient

—Sara, Hepatitis C patient
Researchers have grown the Hepatitis C virus in the laboratory and are studying the details of how the virus reproduces. The results could lead to a better understanding of how the virus gains entry to our liver cells and how it reproduces. This knowledge will be instrumental to developing new drugs and therapy to fight Hepatitis C.

Interferon-based treatment has shown remarkable improvement with progressively increased rates of viral clearance. Remember, this virus was not even identified until 1989. The first interferon trials were for non-A, non-B Hepatitis, and only later was it determined that more than 90% of the cases were Hepatitis C. Initial studies showed that the ALT level normalized in 50% of cases, but viral tests were not available. When viral tests later became available, we were discouraged to learn that only 10-15% of patients treated with standard interferon monotherapy cleared the virus.

Recently, several laboratories isolated special enzymes of the Hepatitis C virus called helicase and proteases. Researchers anticipate that they will be able to develop specific drugs that will inhibit these enzymes and be highly effective in treating Hepatitis C. Similar types of drugs are currently used to treat HIV patients and have been effective in clearing HIV from blood and tissue. The future holds much promise.

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Dr. Gregory Everson is one of the country's leading hepatologists and is Professor of Medicine and Director of Hepatology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

Hedy Weinberg is an award-winning writer who was diagnosed with Hepatitis in 1993. For more information, visit www.hepatitisonline.com.