

Hepatitis C

What is it?

Hepatitis is an illness caused by swelling and irritation of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by chemicals, drugs or viral infections. There are three types of viral hepatitis A, B and C. This fact sheet is about hepatitis C.

How do I know if I have it?

Most people have no symptoms when they are first infected with the virus. This is because the signs are very small and they go away in a few weeks. Symptoms can include flu like symptoms, dark wee and yellowing of the eyeballs and skin (Jaundice). Some people with ongoing hepatitis C will feel well and never develop any of these signs. But they are still infectious.

A small number of people with chronic hepatitis C will have liver failure or cancer of the liver.

People with chronic hepatitis C may feel.

- Fatigue.
- Loss of appetite.
- Nausea/vomiting.
- Soreness in the right upper part of the belly.
- Fever or flu like symptoms.
- Joint pains.

How did I get it?

Hepatitis C is passed when the blood of an infected person enters the bloodstream of an uninfected person. This can happen through.

- Any form of skin penetration with unsterile equipment including, sharing needles, syringes, spoons, tourniquets and other injecting equipment.
- Needle stick injuries.
- Tattooing and body piercing.
- Acupuncture.
- Sharing toothbrushes, razors or sex toys.
- Other items that may have blood on them.
- Blood from an infected person makes direct contact with an open wound or cut of a person who isn't infected (Blood-to-blood contact).

Very **rarely**, hepatitis C may also be transmitted.

- From mother to child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding if the mother's nipples are cracked or infected.
- During sex, if there is blood being swapped.
- During medical procedures, if standard precautions are not followed.

Hepatitis C is not passed on by casual contact. This includes.

- Hugging or holding hands.
- Kissing on the cheek.

- Coughing or sneezing.
- Sharing food.
- Sharing eating utensils such as spoons or chopsticks.

How can I make sure I don't get it?

To prevent the spread of hepatitis C, avoid blood-to-blood contact.

- Never share needles, syringes and other injecting equipment.
- ensure tattoo, acupuncture, and body piercing equipment are sterile.
- Always use condoms, latex gloves or dental dams during sex if blood may be present.
- Ensure health facilities and staff comply with infection control guidelines.
- Never share razors, toothbrushes, combs and nail clippers.

You can get new injecting equipment from your local needle and syringe program. These are free, anonymous and confidential services. You can also get injecting equipment from some pharmacies.

See a doctor regularly for support and advice if you are injecting drugs or doing other things which put you at risk of hepatitis C.

There is no vaccination to prevent hepatitis C.

How do I test for it?

By a blood test. It may take up to 6 months from when you were infected before the test can show if you have it.

How can I get rid of it?

New treatments for hepatitis C are available, these treatments are called 'direct acting antivirals (DAAs). They are highly effective with 90% of people getting rid of hepatitis C. These tablets have very few side effects and the medication only needs to be taken for 12 weeks for most people or 24 weeks in some cases. In some rare cases you may need to have an injection.

This treatment improves the health of the liver and stops damage caused by the virus. People living with hepatitis C should visit their GP about getting treated. People with hepatitis C should consider getting vaccinated for hepatitis A and B.

People with hepatitis C should limit or avoid alcohol. Also get lots of rest and eat a healthy diet.

Who do I need to tell and why?

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C it is important to tell anyone you know that may have been exposed so they can be tested. This helps stop the spread of the virus. Ask your doctor if you aren't sure who you need to tell. They can help you with this and help you contact them.

This fact sheet is just some general information. If you are worried about your health go and see a doctor.

For more information or support visit:

For more information on STIs and safe sex visit the Play Safe website:

www.playsafe.health.nsw.gov.au

Sexual Health Info Link is a service that you can call up for information on STIs and sexual health. It's anonymous and non-judgemental. Call: 1800 451 624 or visit <https://www.shil.nsw.gov.au/>

“Let them know” allows you to send an anonymous messages to tell someone you've had sex with that they have come into contact with the infection: <http://www.letthemknow.org.au/>