

*Hepatitis C is a virus that affects the liver. It is transmitted through blood to blood contact. There is treatment that can cure **some** people, depending on the type of hepatitis C they have. People can have the virus for many years and some may develop serious liver disease.*

Hepatitis C

Last updated 25 March 2011

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that affects the liver. (Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver.)

Are there any symptoms?

People usually have no symptoms when they are first infected with hepatitis C. Some people notice a mild flu-like illness, dark urine or a yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice). These symptoms usually disappear within a few weeks but this doesn't mean that the virus has gone.

Some people with chronic hepatitis C will feel well and never develop any symptoms, however they are still infectious.

Others with chronic hepatitis C will develop fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea/vomiting, soreness in the right upper part of the belly, fever or flu like symptoms, and joint pains.

A very small proportion of people with chronic hepatitis C will eventually develop liver failure or cancer of the liver.

Does hepatitis C get better by itself?

About 25 of every 100 people who are infected with hepatitis C recover and 'clear' the virus without treatment. This usually happens within 4 to 6 weeks of infection, although it may take up to a year. Without treatment, the other 75 people will develop a chronic (ongoing) infection.

How is it transmitted?

Hepatitis C is transmitted 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; body piercing; acupuncture
- sharing toothbrushes, razors, sex toys or other items that may have blood on them
- blood-to-blood contact - if blood from an infected person makes direct contact with an open wound or cut of a person who is not infected

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-to-blood contact
- during medical procedures, if standard precautions are not followed

Hepatitis C is **not** transmitted by casual contact like hugging or holding hands; kissing on the cheek; coughing or sneezing; sharing food; or sharing eating utensils such as spoons or chopsticks.

Blood and blood-product donations have been tested for hepatitis C in Australia since 1990.

How is it prevented?

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 sterile needles and syringes from your local needle and syringe program. These are free, anonymous and confidential services. You can also get sterile needles and syringes from some pharmacies.

See a doctor regularly for support and advice if you are injecting drugs or engaging in other risk behaviours.

There is no vaccination to prevent hepatitis C.

How is it diagnosed?

Hepatitis C is detected by a blood test. It may take up to 6 months from the time of exposure before the test can show if there is an infection.

How is it treated?

The best course of treatment involves a 'combination therapy' of two drugs that reduce inflammation of the liver and can clear the virus in 50 to 80 people out of every 100 treated. Combination therapy can have serious side-effects and takes from six to twelve months to complete.

People with hepatitis C should limit or avoid alcohol, get lots of rest and eat a healthy diet whether they are on treatment or not,

People with hepatitis C should consider getting vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

Telling partners

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C it is important to tell anyone you know that may have been at risk so they can be tested. This helps stop the spread of the virus. Your doctor can help you to decide who may be at risk and help you to contact them. If you wish, your doctor can make the contact or contacts.

Hepatitis C is a notifiable disease. This means that doctors and laboratory staff are legally required to tell NSW Health about new cases. This information is confidential and is used for public health planning.

The information in this fact sheet is general and you should see a doctor if you are worried about your health.

Contact

Hep C Helpline **(02) 9332 1599** or **1800 803 990** (outside Sydney)

Hepatitis C Council of NSW www.hepatitisc.org.au

Multilingual information on hepatitis C is available from the Multicultural HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C Service, www.multiculturalhivhepc.net phone **(02) 9515 5030** or freecall **1800 108 098** (outside Sydney).

NSW Sexual Health Infoline freecall **1800 451 624**.