



Hepatitis C Virus Infection

What is hepatitis C virus infection and what are the symptoms?

Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV).

Most people feel well, have no symptoms and don't know they have hepatitis C infection.

Some people may have a brief illness with symptoms usually appearing six to twelve weeks after being infected with the virus.

Symptoms of acute hepatitis C infection may include fever, tiredness, jaundice (yellow skin or eyes), abdominal pain, dark urine, loss of appetite, and nausea (sick to your stomach).

Others may experience long-term health concerns such as tiredness, lack of energy, or digestive problems.

How common is hepatitis C virus infection?

The total number of people in Canada who have hepatitis C is believed to be about 300,000. This means that about one in every one hundred people in Canada have hepatitis C.

Many have not been tested and do not know they have the disease. There are about 4,000 new cases of hepatitis C virus infection in Canada each year.

People at higher risk of having hepatitis C infection include:

- People who have used injection drugs, or shared drug use equipment;
- People who received a blood transfusion or blood product before May 1992;

- People who received blood-derived coagulation products before July 1988, or intravenous immunoglobulin products prior to 1997;
- People who received an organ or tissue transplant before 1990.

All blood products and donors in Canada are now screened for hepatitis C virus. The risk of infection from a blood transfusion or blood products is now very low, estimated at less than 1 in 500,000 units of blood donated.

There is a risk for hepatitis C virus infection in countries where the blood supply is not tested or where infection can occur through unclean medical equipment.

How can you tell if you have hepatitis C?

After the hepatitis C virus infects your body, antibodies appear in your blood. There are blood tests available to detect the presence of the virus itself, and the antibodies to the virus.

While a few people will recover from the infection and clear the virus from their body, most people will be chronically infected. This means that the person is capable of spreading the infection to others.

How is the hepatitis C virus spread?

At this time, there is no vaccine to prevent people from getting hepatitis C infection.

Hepatitis C virus infection is usually spread by blood-to-blood contact with infected blood. Infection can occur through:

- Illicit drug use including sharing drug snorting, smoking or injection equipment such as needles and syringes, straws and pipes;
- Exposure to blood and blood products including receiving a transfusion of blood or a blood product in a country where the blood supply is not tested for hepatitis C. In Canada, this applies to blood and blood products received before 1992;
- An accidental needle poke with a used needle or syringe;
- An infected mother passing it to her newborn infant (risk of about 5 – 6%);
- Sexual intercourse, especially for those who have multiple sexual partners;
- Sharing toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, nail files, or other items which could have tiny amounts of blood on them;
- Skin-piercing events such as tattoos, body piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis, if the equipment is not clean.

There is a very low but real risk of passing on the virus through other body fluids such as saliva, semen, vaginal secretions or breast milk.

How is hepatitis C *not* spread?

Hepatitis C is *not* known to be spread by:

- Coughing or sneezing;
- Contact such as hugging and kissing;
- Using the same dishes or cutlery;
- Swimming in a chlorinated pool when you have cuts, scrapes or are menstruating;
- Being bitten or stung by an insect which then bites or stings someone else;
- Contact of healthy intact skin of others by your body fluids such as saliva, urine, feces or vomit.

How do you get treatment?

People who test positive for hepatitis C should see their family doctor regularly and have their blood tested to see how their liver is functioning. They may also be referred to a specialist for further testing and assessment.

Some people with hepatitis C virus infection will be eligible for treatment that may clear the virus from their body. Some people with severe liver damage will require a liver transplant.

What should you do if you prick yourself with a dirty needle?

- If possible, put the wounded area lower than the heart, to promote bleeding.
- Wash the area well with soap and water
- Go to the nearest hospital Emergency Department immediately for care.

If you have hepatitis C, can you be protected against other diseases?

Yes. Vaccines that will protect you from hepatitis A, hepatitis B, pneumococcal disease and influenza are provided free to people infected with hepatitis C. You can get these shots from your local health unit or family doctor.

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm or your local public health unit.

Click on www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call **8-1-1** for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.

