



Hepatitis C Virus Infection

What is hepatitis C virus infection?

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

What are the symptoms?

Most people who have hepatitis C infection feel well, have no symptoms, and do not know they have the disease.

Some people may have a brief illness with symptoms usually appearing 6 to 12 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.

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

How common is hepatitis C virus infection?

In Canada, about 1 in every 100 people are infected with the hepatitis C virus.

Many people with hepatitis C infection have not been tested and do not know they have the disease. There are about 2,500 new cases of hepatitis C virus infection identified in B.C. each year.

People at higher risk of having hepatitis C infection include the following:

- 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 of getting hepatitis C 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 virus infection?

After the hepatitis C virus infects your body, antibodies to the virus appear in your blood and these can be detected by a blood test. A positive antibody test means that you have been infected with the virus at some point in time. Another blood test will then be done to determine if you are still infected with the virus.

About 1 in 4 people infected will naturally clear the virus from their body and recover from the infection. The majority of people infected do not clear the virus and will be chronically infected.

How is the hepatitis C virus spread?

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

Hepatitis C infection is usually spread by blood-to-blood contact with infected blood.

Infection can occur through the following:

- Illegal 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 virus. In Canada, this applies to blood and blood products received before 1992.
- An accidental needle poke with a needle or syringe used by someone with hepatitis C infection.
- From a mother to her baby before or during birth (about 5% of the time).
- 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, or vaginal secretions.

How is hepatitis C not spread?

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

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

Breastfeeding is not considered to be a risk for the spread of hepatitis C. However, infected nursing mothers whose nipples are bleeding or cracked should consider refraining from breastfeeding until after they have healed since the virus could be spread through blood.

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

If you prick yourself with a dirty needle, you can take these steps:

- 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.

How do you get treatment?

People who test positive for hepatitis C infection should see their family doctor regularly, and they should 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 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.

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

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



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