

Living Well with Hepatitis C Virus Infection

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection?

Most people who have HCV infection will feel well and have no symptoms. They may not know that they have been exposed to the virus. Some people may have a brief illness with symptoms appearing around 6 weeks after they have been infected with the virus. You need a blood test to see if you have the infection.

Symptoms of acute HCV infection may include:

- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Fever
- Stomach pain
- Joint pain
- Dark urine
- Pale stools
- Nausea and vomiting
- Jaundice (yellow the skin or eyes)

About 75% of people with HCV infection will develop a chronic (lifelong) infection. People with chronic HCV infection may feel tired or have a low mood or stomach pain. They may pass the virus on to other people.

Without treatment, some people with chronic HCV infection will develop scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) over decades. Cirrhosis can lead to liver failure or liver cancer in a small number of people.

For more information on assessing your risk, see [HealthLinkBC File #40a Hepatitis C Virus Infection](#).

Is there a cure or a vaccine for hepatitis C?

Yes. Hepatitis C infection is curable. Newer, highly effective drugs to treat HCV are covered by BC PharmaCare. These drugs have few side effects and are easier to take (no injections) than older medications. In 8 to 12 weeks most patients can be cured of their HCV infection.

It is possible to get infected with HCV again after getting cured, so it is very important to continue to stay healthy after getting cured of your HCV infection.

If you have chronic HCV infection, you should see your health care provider regularly. During these visits, you may have physical exams and other tests (e.g. blood tests, Fibroscan® or ultrasound) to see how healthy your liver is. You may also be referred to a specialist for further testing. Early treatment can prevent very serious liver disease, liver cancer or the need for a liver transplant.

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV infection.

How can I prevent passing HCV on to others?

HCV infection is usually spread by blood-to-blood contact with someone who has a current HCV infection. There is a very low risk of spreading the virus through other body fluids, such as semen or vaginal fluids. This is more likely if blood is present in those fluids.

If you are living with HCV infection, you can reduce the chance of passing the virus to others by doing the following:

- Do not share drug snorting, smoking or injection equipment, such as straws, pipes, cookers, filters, water, needles or syringes
- Never donate your blood, semen, body organs or tissues
- Tell your health care provider if you have ever donated or received blood products or tissue transplants
- Tell anyone whose blood has direct contact with your blood to visit a local public health unit or their health care provider
- Tell your health care provider, dentist and anyone else who might come in contact with your blood, (e.g. when getting tattoos, body-piercing, electrolysis or acupuncture), that you are living with HCV. This will allow them to take precautions to help prevent virus transmission
- Discuss with your partner(s) the fact that you are living with HCV

- Practice safer sex. Use a condom every time you have sex, if you have multiple partners. This also helps to reduce the risk of other sexually transmitted infections. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #08o Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#)
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, dental floss, nail files or other items that could have tiny amounts of blood on them
- Bandage all open cuts and sores until healed
- Put articles with blood on them in a separate plastic bag before disposing into household garbage (e.g. bandages, tissues, tampons, razors, dental floss)
- Clean and disinfect areas that could have blood on them using a fresh solution of household bleach. Make a bleach solution by mixing 1 part bleach to 9 parts of water. Leave the bleach solution in contact with the spill area for at least 10 minutes before wiping it up. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #97 Contact with Blood or Body Fluids: Protecting Against Infection](#)
- Breast/chestfeeding is safe, unless the nipples and/or areola are cracked or bleeding. During this time, the milk should be expressed and discarded. When your nipples are no longer cracked or bleeding, you can resume breast/chestfeeding your baby

What can I do to stay as healthy as possible?

To promote good health while living with HCV infection, learn about the disease and consider the following:

- Get more information about hepatitis C from your health care provider, local health unit, or support groups. See Hepatitis Education Canada at <https://hepatitiseducation.med.ubc.ca>, Canadian Liver Foundation at www.liver.ca/ and Help4Hep at www.help4hep.org/
- Avoid alcohol as it can cause damage to the liver and increases the liver damage caused by HCV. If you do use alcohol, try to reduce the amount that you use. To learn more about support options, visit CATIE www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/hepc-in-depth/treatment/hepatitis-c-treatment-and-drug-use
- Avoid illegal drug use and smoking. To find a needle exchange site, take home naloxone kits and training, or an overdose prevention site, see the toward the heart site <https://towardtheheart.com/site-finder> and

[HealthLinkBC File #102a Understanding Harm Reduction: Substance Use](#)

For information about quitting smoking, see [HealthLinkBC File #30c Quitting Smoking](#)

For information on opioid substitution therapy and managing substance use, visit HeretoHelp www.heretohelp.bc.ca/workbook/you-and-substance-use-stuff-to-think-about-and-ways-to-make-changes or call 310-6789 (no area code) for free, 24 hour support

- Use prescribed over-the-counter medications or other herbal or alternative therapies only as advised by your health care provider
- Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight or obese and having diabetes can increase your chance of harming your liver. To prevent this, get regular exercise and eat healthy, nutritious food as outlined by the Canada's Food Guide. Visit <https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/> for more information
- Reduce stress and get adequate sleep
- The following vaccines are provided free to anyone who has ever been infected with HCV:
 - Hepatitis A and B vaccines (if you are not already immune). Hepatitis A and hepatitis B virus infections may cause further liver damage. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #25a Hepatitis B Vaccine](#) and [HealthLinkBC File #33 Hepatitis A Vaccine](#)
 - Pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine. Get a booster dose of the vaccine 5 years later. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #62b Pneumococcal Polysaccharide Vaccine](#)
 - Influenza vaccine. For your best protection you should get the vaccine every year as soon as it is available (usually October). For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #12d Inactivated Influenza \(Flu\) Vaccine](#)
- Practice safer sex to protect yourself from other sexually transmitted infections and protect your partners from HCV



BC Centre for Disease Control
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