

Living Well with Hepatitis C Virus Infection

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

Most people infected with HCV 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 of hepatitis usually appearing 6 to 12 weeks after they have been infected with the virus.

Symptoms of acute HCV infection may include: fever, tiredness, stomach pain, dark urine, pale stool, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, and jaundice or yellowing of the skin and eyes. A few people may experience long-term health concerns, such as tiredness, lethargy or digestive problems.

About 7 out of 10 people who become infected with HCV carry the virus throughout their lives. Without treatment these people can pass the virus on to others, and may develop serious illness later in life.

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

How can I prevent passing HCV on to others?

Hepatitis C virus is usually spread by contact with blood containing the virus. However, there is a very low but real risk of spreading the virus through other body fluids, such as semen or vaginal secretions, especially if blood is present in those secretions. It is much more likely for someone to be exposed to HCV following contact with infected blood than with other body fluids.

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

- Never donate your blood, semen, body organs or tissues.
- Discuss with your partner(s) the fact that you are living with HCV.
- Practice safer sex. Use a condom every time you have sex, especially if you have more than one partner. This also helps to reduce the risk of other

sexually transmitted infections. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #08o Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#).

- Tell your health care provider if you have ever donated or received blood products or tissue transplants.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, dental floss, nail files, or other items that could have tiny amounts of blood on them.
- Do not share drug snorting, smoking or injection equipment, such as straws, pipes, cookers, filters, water, needles or syringes.
- Clean and disinfect areas that could have blood on them using a fresh solution of household bleach. The bleach solution can be made by mixing 1 part bleach to 9 parts of water. The bleach solution should be left 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](#).
- Keep all open cuts and sores bandaged until healed.
- Put articles stained with blood in a separate plastic bag before disposing into household garbage – for example, bandages, tissues, tampons, razors, dental floss.
- Tell your health care provider, dentist and anyone else who might come in contact with your blood, such as those who do tattoos, body-piercing, electrolysis, or acupuncture, that you are living with HCV. This will allow them to take precautions to help prevent virus transmission.
- Advise anyone whose blood has direct contact with your blood to visit a local public health unit or their health care provider.

Breastfeeding is not considered to be a risk for the spread of HCV. However, if a breastfeeding mother living with HCV has cracked or bleeding nipples (and/or surrounding areola), she should express and discard her breast milk until after they have healed since the virus could be spread through blood.

Is there treatment or vaccine for hepatitis C?

At this time, there is no vaccine to prevent HCV infection; however, there are very effective and highly curative treatments for people living with chronic HCV infection. If you have HCV, you should discuss these options with a health care provider.

Whether you start treatment or not, you should see your health care provider regularly to assess your liver and overall health. You may be referred to a specialist for further testing and assessment. Some B.C. residents living with HCV who have evidence of liver damage are eligible for treatment to cure their infection. Treatment of eligible individuals is publicly funded through B.C. PharmaCare. Some people with severe liver damage from HCV may require a liver transplant.

What can I do to stay as healthy as possible?

Long-term or chronic HCV infection may lead to scarring of the liver, called cirrhosis. The chance of developing cirrhosis increases with the length of time you've had the virus. After 20 years, about 10 to 20% of people with chronic hepatitis C will have cirrhosis. Cirrhosis can lead to liver failure or liver cancer in a small number of people. While it's not well understood who will progress to serious liver disease, there are things that can increase this risk. For example, people who drink alcohol are at greater risk of damaging their liver.

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, support groups, Hepatitis Education Canada <http://hepatitiseducation.med.ubc.ca>, or Canadian Liver Foundation at www.liver.ca.
- Avoid any alcohol as it increases the liver damage caused by HCV. If you do use alcohol, try to reduce the amount that you use as safely as possible. To learn more about support options, visit CATIE www.catie.ca/en/practical-guides/hepc-in-depth/treatment/safer-drug-and-alcohol-use-during-hep-c-treatment.
- Avoid smoking and other drugs. For information about quitting smoking, see [HealthLinkBC File #30c Quitting Smoking](#). For information about managing substance use, visit HeretoHelp

www.heretohelp.bc.ca/skills/managing-problem-substance-use or call 310-6789 for free, 24 hour support.

- Use over-the-counter and prescribed medications only as advised by your health care provider.
- Do not take megavitamin therapy or herbal products without consulting your health care provider.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight and having diabetes can increase your chance of developing serious liver disease related to hepatitis C. To prevent this, eat healthy, nutritious food as outlined by the Eating Well with Canada's Food Guide. Visit www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/canada-food-guides.html for more information.
- Get regular exercise, reduce stress and get adequate sleep.
- Get the hepatitis A and B vaccines, if you are not already immune. These vaccines are provided free to people living with HCV. 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](#).
- Get the pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine and then get a booster dose of the vaccine 5 years later. The vaccine and the booster dose are free for people living with HCV. For more information, see [HealthLinkBC File #62b Pneumococcal Polysaccharide Vaccine](#).
- Get the influenza vaccine every year. The vaccine is free for people living with HCV and is usually available in October. For your best protection you should get the vaccine as soon as it is available. 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 partner from HCV.



BC Centre for Disease Control
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