

# Hepatitis C

***Hepatitis C is a viral infection that affects the liver. It is transmitted through blood to blood contact. New treatments are now available. More than 95% people with hepatitis C can be cured through tablets taken by mouth. Without treatment, people with hepatitis C can develop serious liver disease.***

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## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease caused by a virus. Hepatitis C virus is one of many different viruses that can infect the liver. It lives in liver tissue and blood and can cause severe scarring and damage to the liver. This can have long-lasting health effects.

About 80% of people infected with hepatitis C develop chronic (long-lasting) infection. Without treatment, some people eventually develop liver failure or cancer of the liver.

About 20% of people infected with hepatitis C virus recover or 'clear' the infection without specific treatment.

## What are the symptoms?

Most people have no symptoms when they are first infected with hepatitis C. If there are symptoms, they usually develop within one to three months of infection and can include:

- loss of appetite;
- nausea, sometimes with vomiting;
- tiredness;
- abdominal pain;
- yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice); and
- dark urine and pale stools.

These symptoms last from days to a few weeks and then get better without treatment but this doesn't mean that the virus has gone.

People with chronic hepatitis C infection usually appear well for many years but may develop symptoms as their liver damage progresses.

## How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when the blood of an infected person enters the bloodstream of an uninfected person. The amount of blood might be so small that it's invisible to the eye. This can happen through:

- any form of skin penetration if contaminated equipment is used, including: sharing needles, syringes and other injecting equipment; needle stick injuries; tattooing; body piercing; acupuncture; or other procedures using contaminated instruments;
- transfusion of infected blood or blood products;
- sharing personal items that may have blood on them such as toothbrushes, razors, or sex toys; or
- blood from an infected person coming into direct contact with an open wound of another person.

Rarely, hepatitis C may also be transmitted:

- from mother to child during pregnancy or childbirth; or
- during sex without a condom, particularly in people with HIV infection.

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.

## Who is at risk?

In Australia, people who may have hepatitis C are those who:

- inject drugs, or have injected drugs in the past;
- have been in prison;
- had a blood transfusion in Australia before February 1990, or more recently in another country;
- have a mother with hepatitis C infection;
- have a sexual partner with hepatitis C infection and are HIV positive;
- are on haemodialysis
- were born in, or have had medical procedures in a country with a high prevalence of hepatitis C;
- have had a tattoo or body piercing done by someone with poor infection control practices; or
- have had other blood to blood contact with another person.

## How is it prevented?

There is no vaccination to prevent against hepatitis C. Prevention of hepatitis C requires preventing exposure to blood that may contain hepatitis C.

The best way to prevent hepatitis C is to avoid any possible blood-to-blood contact by:

- never sharing needles, syringes and other injecting equipment;
- ensuring tattoo, acupuncture, and body piercing equipment is sterile;
- only undergoing surgical, podiatry, or dental procedures with practitioners registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (or overseas equivalent);
- preventing contact with other people's body fluids (e.g. use gloves to dress wounds and to clean up spills of blood and other body fluids);
- always use condoms, gloves or dental dams during sex if blood may be present; and
- never sharing personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, combs and nail clippers.

Sterile needles and syringes can be obtained 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.

## How is it diagnosed?

Hepatitis C is detected by a blood test.

## How is it treated?

New treatments for hepatitis C became available in Australia from 1 March 2016. These medicines, called direct acting antivirals (DAAs):

- are highly effective with a cure rate of over 95%;
- have few or no side effects;
- need to be taken for only 8 weeks or 12 weeks for most people, or for 24 weeks in some instances; and
- are taken in tablet form, without the need for injections.

In contrast, the previously available treatments were less effective, frequently had severe side effects and injections were required for 6 to 12 months.

Hepatitis C treatment improves people's liver health by stopping liver damage caused by the hepatitis C virus and even reversing some of the damage that has already occurred. Treatment also means that the person can no longer transmit hepatitis C virus to another person.

People living with hepatitis C virus are recommended to see their general practitioner (GP) about accessing hepatitis C treatment. A liver biopsy is no longer required before starting treatment.

To reduce the risk of further liver damage, people with hepatitis C should:

- limit or avoid alcohol;
- eat a healthy diet and undertake regular physical exercise; and
- get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

## Telling others

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C it is important to tell people who may also have been exposed so they can be tested. 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 for you, while also keeping your identity confidential.

If you are a health care worker you should ensure that you do not pass hepatitis C on to patients. Speak to your doctor, professional body or your employer. Further information is available in the *Australian National Guidelines for the Management of Health Care Workers known to be Infected with Blood-Borne Viruses* available at:

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cda-cdna-bloodborne.htm> .

## What is the public health response?

Doctors, hospitals and laboratories must notify new cases of hepatitis C to the local public health unit. This information is kept confidential and is used to better understand who is at risk of the disease and to help control further spread.

## For more information

- Visit <https://www.hep.org.au/>
- Multicultural HIV and Hepatitis Service at <http://www.mhahs.org.au/> or on phone **02 9515 1234** or **1800 108 098** (NSW country)
- Sexual Health Infoline **1800 451 624**
- NSW public health units **1300 066 055**
- For information on Needle and Syringe Program (NSP) outlets in NSW visit: <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/hepatitis/Pages/nsp-outlets.aspx>
- NUAA (NSW Users and AIDS Association) at <http://www.nuaa.org.au/things-matter/blood-borne-viruses/hep-c/>