

# Hepatitis C

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an infectious virus that is carried in the blood and affects the liver. It's an infection that is increasing in Canada and around the world. While not identified until 1989, the hepatitis C virus has been around for a very long time.

## Why is hepatitis C a health concern?

Some individuals will recover from their infection, but eighty percent of those infected will progress to a chronic (carrier) stage. Many infected people do not know they have the virus because for some, there will be no symptoms and for others, the symptoms may not show up for 20 to 30 years. During this time, you can spread the virus to others. You may not know you have this virus until damage has already been done to your liver.

## What are the symptoms?

The illness begins almost like a 'flu' with fatigue, a fever, body aches and pains, and perhaps nausea and vomiting. The urine may become dark brown. In severe infections, the skin or the eyes may turn yellow (jaundice).

## Could I have hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is spread through contact with the blood of infected people. This can happen if you have shared needles to inject drugs or shared any drug-related equipment (such as straws, pipes, spoons, cookers, water, filters), even if the drug use was many years ago or happened only once. Other activities such as tattooing, body piercing or acupuncture with unsterile equipment or techniques can spread the hepatitis C virus, or by sharing razors, scissors, nail clippers or a toothbrush with an infected person. Exposure can also occur during medical or dental procedures that involve the use of contaminated equipment, both within and outside Canada, or if you have had a needle stick injury with infected blood. Other risks include unprotected sexual activity with blood contact or being born to a mother with hepatitis C.

## **How can I find out if I have hepatitis C?**

If you think you may be at risk, you should ask your doctor about taking a simple blood test to determine if you have the virus. If the test is positive your health care provider may suggest you see a specialist who knows a lot about liver infections.

## **How can I avoid getting hepatitis C?**

Don't share needles or drug-related equipment, EVER! Wear latex gloves if you are likely to be in contact with someone's blood. Use a condom if you have sex with more than one partner. If you are getting a tattoo, or planning to have body piercing or acupuncture, check things out first. Cleaning with bleach may not kill the hepatitis C virus.

## **What if I have hepatitis C?**

Avoid or limit alcohol consumption. Medications can be used to treat hepatitis C. Talk to your health care provider or specialist to see if treatment is right for you. Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B to prevent further damage to your liver. There is no vaccine to prevent infection from hepatitis C. If you have hepatitis C, you may infect others. To keep from spreading the virus: Do not share needles, drug equipment, toothbrushes, razors or other items that could have blood on it. Cover open sores or breaks in your skin and use a condom if you have more than one sex partner (risk of sexual transmission is low).

## **For more information on hepatitis C:**

Call the Health Unit @ 1-800-660-5853 or visit [www.healthunit.org](http://www.healthunit.org)

Adapted from "Hepatitis C get the facts" pamphlet, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009 and Frequently asked Questions about Hepatitis C, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009.