

Health Unit Media Release

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Are you at risk for Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (HCV) is an infectious virus that is carried in the blood and affects the liver. **It is estimated that 110,000 people in Ontario are infected with HCV. Of those however, about one-third don't know that they have it.** This is because hepatitis C progresses slowly and many people do not have symptoms after becoming infected.

Hepatitis C is spread through contact with the blood of an infected person. In the past, many people became infected through blood transfusions. Presently, the most common way to become infected is by sharing needles or any drug-related equipment to inject drugs, 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 can also spread the hepatitis C virus, or by sharing razors, scissors, nail clippers or a toothbrush with an infected person. As well, exposure can occur during medical or dental procedures that involve the use of contaminated equipment, both within and outside Canada.

The risk of getting the virus through ordinary household or workplace interactions is extremely low. Hepatitis C is NOT spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing or shaking hands or by being around someone who is sneezing or coughing. The hepatitis C virus is not found in food or water.

If you think it's possible that you have been exposed to hepatitis C, contact your health care provider to ask about testing. A simple blood test can determine if you have the virus. There are effective treatments for hepatitis C. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist to discuss what is appropriate for you.

There is no vaccine to prevent infection from hepatitis C, so the best defense is to know how to protect yourself. Check out the Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit web site @ www.healthunit.org for more information about risk factors, protecting yourself and others, treatment and living with hepatitis C.

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