

F a c t s

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

It is infection of the liver caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV). The severity of liver damage caused by this virus varies from person to person. About 15–25% of people have a mild, short-lived illness and clear the virus completely. In others, the virus persists and over many years may cause scarring (cirrhosis) of the liver. The risk of cirrhosis increases with alcohol use and other liver infections. Liver cancer is frequently associated with cirrhosis.

What are the Symptoms?

The majority of people with this virus do not have any symptoms at the time of the initial infection. Symptoms may develop within 6 - 9 weeks after exposure but this time may range from 2 weeks to 6 months. Symptoms of the acute infection may include weakness, fatigue, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, dark urine, jaundice (a yellowing of skin and eyes).

How is it Spread?

At this time, there is no vaccine to prevent people from getting Hepatitis C infection.

Hepatitis C virus infection is usually spread by blood-to-blood contact. This occurs when the blood of an infected person comes into contact with the blood of another.

Infection can occur through:

- Illicit drug use including sharing drug snorting, smoking or injection equipment such as needles and syringes, straws and pipes. This is the most common risk factor in Canada.
- Exposure to blood and blood products including receiving a transfusion of blood or a blood product in a country where the blood supply is not tested for Hepatitis C. In Canada, this applies to blood and blood products received before 1992.
- An accidental needle poke with a used needle or syringe; this risk is estimated to be approximately 3-10%.
- An infected mother passing it to her newborn infant (risk of about 4-7%); Caesarean section may be recommended to help prevent HCV infection. Breastfeeding does not appear to be a risk unless nipples are cracked or bleeding.
- Sexual intercourse, especially for those who have multiple sexual partners. For prolonged (e.g. 20 years) exposure to one infected partner, the risk is estimated to be about 3%.

— *Health & Environment Facts* —

- Sharing toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, nail files, or other items which could have tiny amounts of blood on them.
- Skin-piercing procedures such as tattoos, body piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis, if the equipment is not sterile.

How is Hepatitis C Diagnosed?

A blood test detects antibodies to the virus in people infected with the virus. If you test positive for Hepatitis C antibodies, your doctor can order other blood tests to find out whether actual viral material can be found in your blood, as well as blood tests that help to assess the health of your liver. You may be referred to a specialist for follow-up and assessment for treatment.

How do I live with Hepatitis C?

It is important for people living with Hepatitis C to implement lifestyle changes, including:

- maintaining a well-balanced, nutritious diet
- avoiding the use of alcohol (even social drinking)
- immunization against other types of viral hepatitis (Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B)
- For some Hepatitis C patients, drug treatment may be appropriate and must be addressed through careful assessment by a specialist. The best treatment strategy may be to use a combination of two antiviral drugs: pegylated interferon plus ribavirin.
- On the basis of recent studies, the pegylated interferons are expected to cure about 55-60% of treated patients. Pegylated interferons are a slow release, longer-lasting form of traditional alpha interferons. New drugs are being developed. To date, no herbal remedies have been shown to be effective.

For more information please contact the health unit at 376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456 or go to the Canadian Liver Foundation website at www.liver.ca.