



Hepatitis C

The facts



What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital part of the body. If it does not work properly, it can cause serious illness.

Viral hepatitis is the term used when the hepatitis is caused by a virus. There are several types of viral hepatitis including A, B, C, D and E.

All these viruses affect the liver but are spread in different ways. So the ways to prevent people from getting the virus are different too.

Drinking alcohol or taking drugs (whether legal, illegal or prescription) can also cause a type of hepatitis.

This pamphlet is about hepatitis C only.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

When first infected with the hepatitis C virus many people may not feel ill. Others may find their urine becomes dark and their eyes and their skin may turn yellow (jaundice) or they may experience a minor ‘flu-like’ illness. These symptoms may disappear within a few weeks but this does not necessarily mean that the infection has also gone. If you have hepatitis symptoms, or think you have been put at risk, you should consult your doctor. A blood test can determine if you have hepatitis C.

When a person has the virus for more than six months the illness is called chronic hepatitis C.

The symptoms of chronic hepatitis C may be:

- mild to severe lethargy (tiredness),
- loss of appetite,
- nausea and vomiting,
- soreness in the upper right part of the belly (under the ribs),
- fever or flu-like symptoms, or
- pain in the joints.

In many cases people who have chronic hepatitis C may not feel ill.

What happens if you have hepatitis C?

Over 70 per cent of people who have been infected may continue to have the virus in their blood and have chronic hepatitis C. It is believed that up to 15 to 20 per cent of people who have chronic hepatitis C will develop cirrhosis, which is scarring of the liver. This may take 20 years or more to develop. Some years later, a small number of people with cirrhosis may develop liver cancer.

People with chronic hepatitis C remain infectious throughout their lives and can potentially pass the virus on to others.

Twenty to thirty per cent of people who have been infected may clear the virus from their blood with no treatment. These people no longer have hepatitis C and are not infectious.

How is hepatitis C spread?

Blood

The hepatitis C virus is present in the blood of an infected person. If infected blood enters another person's blood stream, that person may get the virus.

The most common way people can get hepatitis C in Australia is by sharing drug-injecting equipment such as needles, syringes and spoons.

Hepatitis C can also be spread by:

- tattooing and body piercing using equipment that has not been properly cleaned and sterilised.
- sharing toothbrushes, razor blades or other similar personal items that could have small amounts of blood on them.
- one person's blood coming into contact with open cuts on another person.
- needlestick injuries in the health care setting.

People who receive blood transfusions in Australia have a very low risk of getting hepatitis C because blood donations have been tested for the virus since February 1990.

Some people may have contracted hepatitis C from unsterile medical procedures, blood transfusions or blood products and mass immunisation programs provided in a country other than Australia.

Some people cannot pinpoint how they became infected.

Mother to Baby

Mothers with hepatitis C may on rare occasions pass the virus to their babies during pregnancy, or at the time of birth. Breastfeeding is considered safe and only cracked or bleeding nipples may be a problem.

Sex

Sexual transmission rates of hepatitis C are very low, but the risk is increased with certain sexual practices or circumstances where there is the possibility of blood-to-blood contact (for example, sex during menstruation and rough sexual practices).

How can I avoid becoming infected with hepatitis C?

At present there is no vaccine available to prevent a person from being infected with hepatitis C.

- Do not share personal items such as toothbrushes, razors, nail files or nail scissors, as these can puncture the skin and have small amounts of blood on them.
- If you are involved in body piercing, tattooing, electrolysis or acupuncture, always ensure that any instrument that pierces the skin is sterile.
- Health care workers are required to follow standard infection control guidelines.
- Wherever possible, wear single-use gloves if you give someone first aid or clean up blood or body fluids.
- Although hepatitis C is not considered to be a sexually transmissible infection in Australia, you may wish to consider the benefits of safe sex practices (eg, using condoms and dams with lubricant) to protect you and your partner from a range of sexually transmissible infections, eg chlamydia. If blood is present during sex, the risk of spreading hepatitis C increases and safe sex practices may be advisable. Talk to your doctor if you are unsure.

For people who inject drugs:

- Always wash your hands before and after injecting.
- Never share needles and syringes. Never share other equipment such as spoons, swabs, filters, tourniquets and water as they can also be contaminated. New needles and syringes are available from some chemists and Needle and Syringe Program outlets.
- For further information on where to obtain new needles and syringes or, if necessary, how to clean them, contact DIRECTLINE on 1800 888 236. This is also an information referral and counselling telephone line for people who have a problem with alcohol and other drugs.

Cleaning and removal of blood spills:

- Wear single-use gloves and use paper towels to mop up the blood spill and dispose of used paper towels in a plastic bag.
- Wash area with warm water and detergent, rinse and dry.
- Place used gloves into a plastic bag, then seal and dispose of the plastic bag in a rubbish bin.
- Wash hands in warm soapy water and dry thoroughly.

Is there a test for hepatitis C?

Yes. Having an antibody test tells you whether or not you have ever been infected with hepatitis C. This test does not tell you whether you still have the hepatitis C virus since antibodies will remain in the blood even if your body has cleared the virus.

It may take two to three months (or sometimes longer) from the time of infection before a blood test can detect antibodies to hepatitis C.

If you have a positive hepatitis C antibody test, specialised laboratories can do an additional test called hepatitis C PCR to determine if the virus is still present in your body.

What should I do if I already have hepatitis C?

Some people who have hepatitis C choose to make changes to their lives, such as reducing alcohol intake, maintaining a well balanced diet that is low in fat and considering overall health maintenance.

You should also:

- consult your doctor who will monitor your condition and, if necessary, refer you to a specialist.
- consider being immunised against other hepatitis viruses for which there are vaccines (ie hepatitis A and hepatitis B).
- completely cover any cut or wound with a waterproof dressing.

If you have hepatitis C you should not:

- share injecting equipment,
- donate blood or body organs, or
- share personal items such as toothbrushes or razors.

Although there is no legal obligation to do so, you may wish to discuss your condition with your health care provider, eg doctor, dentist, naturopath, for optimal health care.

Is there treatment for hepatitis C?

New combination treatment with the medicines pegylated interferon and ribavirin has greatly improved outcomes for people with hepatitis C. These treatments can help decrease inflammation in the liver and can clear the virus in around 50 per cent of people. There are some side effects related to hepatitis C medicines. It is important to talk to your doctor and other support services about treatment options.

Some people who have hepatitis C choose to use complementary therapies to manage the side effects of combination medicines.

Hepatitis C discrimination

People with hepatitis C have the same rights as other people and should not be discriminated against.

State and Federal Law prohibits discrimination in the areas of employment, education, accommodation, the provision of goods, services and facilities, buying or selling property, membership of clubs and administration of Commonwealth and State programs. If you believe that you or someone you know has been discriminated against because of hepatitis C infection, you should contact the Equal Opportunity Commission.

More information

To Find Out More About
Hepatitis C Contact:

Hepatitis Line

Freecall: 1800 800 241

Vietnamese Info Line:

1800 456 007

www.aidshep.org.au

Hepatitis C Council of Victoria

Suite 5, 200 Sydney Road

Brunswick 3056

Victoria, Australia

Tel: (03) 9380 4644

Country Calls:

1800 703 003

Fax: (03) 9380 4688

Email: hepcvic@vicnet.net.au

www.hepcvic.org.au

Statewide Resource Centre: Access

Information Centre

at The Alfred

Tel: (03) 9276 6993

Email: access@alfred.org.au

www.accessinfo.org.au

Information on hepatitis C
and safe drug use: VIVAIDS

PO Box 2435

FITZROY 3065

Victoria, Australia

Tel: (03) 9419 3633

Fax: (03) 9415 7055

Email: vivaids@vivaids.org.au

Foreign language versions

This information is also
available on the Internet.
Community languages are
also available on the Internet
at: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/bbv-sti/hepc>

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