

HEPATITIS C

GET THE FACTS



WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV is far more infectious than HIV. Presently, there is no vaccine to prevent HCV infection.

In 2011, it is estimated that over 220,000 people in Canada were infected with HCV. In 2012, 10,180 new cases of hepatitis C were reported in Canada. It has been estimated that over 40% of people living with chronic hepatitis C don't even know they are infected.

About 15 to 25 percent of adults will recover within 6 months of becoming infected (acute hepatitis C). The remaining 75 to 85 percent are unable to clear the virus and will become chronically infected. Chronic hepatitis C is treatable and in some instances can be cured.

WHY IS HEPATITIS C A HEALTH CONCERN?

Many people infected with HCV do not know they have the virus because symptoms can take two to six months to appear and the majority of people will not develop symptoms. During this time, they can spread the infection to others. You may not know you have this infection until damage has already been done to your liver. Potential complications from chronic hepatitis C include cirrhosis of the liver, liver failure, liver cancer and premature death.

WHY DO I NEED MY LIVER?

It's important to keep your liver healthy because it plays a key role in your overall health. It helps digest food and stores vitamins and minerals. Most importantly, the liver acts as a filter for chemicals and other substances that enter the body. It is also important in the production of your blood and many of the proteins that keep your body working.

HOW IS THE HEPATITIS C VIRUS SPREAD?

HCV is spread through contact with infected blood. While many people became infected through blood and blood products in the past, the risk of this happening now is negligible due to rigorous standards ensuring the safety of the blood supply. The majority of HCV transmission in Canada today is due to injection drug use and sharing of contaminated needles and other drug-using paraphernalia (e.g., straws, pipes, cookers etc.).

The most common risk factors for HCV infection include:

- Injection drug use (past and/or present) and intranasal drug use (snorting) when sharing contaminated drug-using equipment (e.g., needles, straws, pipes, spoons and cookers);
- Tattooing, body piercing or acupuncture when unsterile equipment or techniques are used;
- Exposure in the workplace by getting pricked by a needle or sharp equipment that has infected blood on it;
- Having resided or received health services in countries where HCV is common (e.g., Central, East and South Asia; Australasia and Oceania; Eastern Europe; Sub-Saharan Africa; and North Africa/Middle East);
- Having received medical or dental care where basic infection control practices were not followed;
- Sharing personal care articles such as razors, scissors, nail clippers, or a toothbrush with an infected person;
- Unprotected sexual activity that includes contact with blood or an exchange of blood with an infected person, particularly among those with HIV infection;

- Being born to a mother with HCV; and
- Exposure to blood and blood products or organ transplantation in Canada prior to 1992.

HCV is NOT spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing or shaking hands or by being around someone who is sneezing or coughing. It cannot be spread by breastfeeding unless the nipples are cracked and bleeding. HCV is not found in food or water.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS C?

You may have hepatitis C and not have any signs or symptoms. Symptoms of HCV infection can include some or all of the following: fatigue, loss of appetite, fever, nausea, vomiting, dark urine, pale stools, stomach pain, joint pain and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes). The majority of people infected with HCV don't develop any symptoms until their liver has already been damaged.

There are medications available to treat hepatitis C which can help to protect you from serious liver damage. Early diagnosis is critical because the sooner treatment is started, the better the chance that it may help clear the virus. Early diagnosis can also prevent individuals from unknowingly spreading the virus to others. That's why it's important to take precautions against HCV infection, and to get tested if you think you might be infected.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF AND OTHERS AGAINST HCV?

The best way to keep yourself safe from HCV infection is to take the following precautions:

- Avoid sharing needles/syringes, spoons, drug solutions or water, filters, cookers, pipes, straws used for snorting drugs, and any other drug-related equipment. Cleaning with bleach may not kill HCV;
- Avoid dental, medical or cosmetic procedures that penetrate the skin (e.g. transfusions, acupuncture, piercing or tattooing) unless you are certain that the needles, materials and equipment are sterile;
- Wear latex gloves if you are likely to be in contact with someone else's blood;
- Don't share personal items like razors, scissors, nail clippers or toothbrushes;
- Practice safer sex. Use condoms/dental dams to reduce the risk of acquiring sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBIs) including HCV. The risk of sexual transmission of HCV is low but not absent, particularly for those with more than one sex partner, if there is a concurrent sexually transmitted infection with open sores present or, during menstruation; and
- Be especially careful when travelling abroad in countries where HCV is widespread.

HOW CAN I FIND OUT IF I HAVE HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C can be diagnosed through a blood test. If you think you are at risk, or may be infected with hepatitis C talk to your healthcare provider about testing for hepatitis C.

WHAT IF I HAVE HEPATITIS C?

Some adults with hepatitis C will clear the virus on their own within 6 months. If you clear the virus, you will no longer be infected and will not be able to transmit the virus to others. People who have cleared the virus can be re-infected with HCV. Until your health care provider tells you that you have cleared the virus, you are still infectious and can transmit the virus to others. Management and care of acute hepatitis C is focused on relief of symptoms, preventing complications and further transmission.

If you have chronic hepatitis C your health care provider will monitor you closely with blood tests to keep an eye on your liver health, and may recommend treatment. Not all people with chronic HCV infection need to be treated. A combination of medications can be used to treat hepatitis C. Talk to your health care provider to see if treatment is right for you.

To prevent further damage to your liver, your health care provider may advise vaccination against hepatitis A and B. Many provinces and territories provide these vaccinations at no direct cost to you. In addition, it is recommended that you avoid alcohol consumption to decrease your risk of liver damage.

If you have hepatitis C, you may infect others.

You can prevent spreading the virus by following the same safer sex, drug behaviour and personal hygiene precautions outlined earlier to reduce your risk of infection. Additionally:

- Never donate blood, tissue, organs or semen;
- Ensure that drug use partners and sexual partners are tested for HCV; and
- Cover open sores or breaks in your skin.

REMEMBER:

Hepatitis C is an infection that progresses slowly and for many people effective treatment is available. It is important to find out if you have the virus so that you can take the necessary steps to protect yourself and others.

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YOU CAN HAVE IT AND NOT KNOW IT

For more information on other sexually transmitted and blood borne infections visit our website at:

www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/health-sante/sexual-sexuelle/index-eng.php