

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that causes inflammation of the liver. The liver is an important part of the body's digestive system and performs functions such as digesting fats and filtering toxins. About 25% of people with hepatitis C will clear the virus (recover) over time and 75% of people will develop chronic hepatitis C. If left untreated, chronic hepatitis C can cause cirrhosis (scarring of the liver). In some cases, this may develop into liver cancer.

How do you get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is passed on through blood-to-blood contact, most commonly through activities such as sharing unsterile needles, syringes and other drug injecting equipment. Hepatitis C can also be spread through:

- unsterile piercing and tattooing equipment
- sharing toothbrushes, razors or sex toys that may have blood on them
- pregnancy or childbirth (mother to baby)
- one person's blood coming into contact with open cuts on another person (e.g. contact sports)
- unprotected sex if blood or open wounds are present (the risk of getting hepatitis C through sex is generally low)

How can I protect myself from hepatitis C?

The best ways to prevent getting hepatitis C are to:

- only use sterile needles or syringes for injecting drugs and never share needles or other drug injecting equipment
- only get tattoos or piercings from licensed, trained professionals and be cautious about getting them done overseas
- don't share toothbrushes or razors
- practice safe sex

There is no vaccination for hepatitis C.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C infection?

Hepatitis C usually has no symptoms however some people may experience mild flu-like symptoms, dark urine or yellowing of the skin and eyes in the first few weeks.

Sometimes people with hepatitis C develop fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting, abdominal pain (on the right side), fever and joint pain. These symptoms often don't appear until many years after being infected, by which time the infection has become chronic hepatitis C.

How do I get tested for hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C testing is done with a blood test that looks for markers of the hepatitis C virus in your blood. You can ask your doctor whether you need to have a blood test for hepatitis C.

How is hepatitis C treated?

Effective treatment which can cure hepatitis C in more than 95% of cases is now available in Australia. Direct acting antiviral (DAA) therapy, a new single pill treatment taken for 12 weeks, is available on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. This treatment has been shown to substantially reduce the risk of liver cancer and liver failure and improve survival rates. Your doctor can provide you with more information about treatment options.

What is your responsibility if you have hepatitis C?

If you have hepatitis C it is your responsibility to let people who may have been exposed (e.g. people you may have had blood-to-blood contact with) know so that they can be tested and treated if needed. Your doctor will provide you with specific advice.

For more information

- **Family Planning NSW Talkline** – www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline or 1300 658 886
- **National Relay Service** (for deaf people) – 13 36 77
- **TIS National's immediate interpreting service** – 131 450
- **Visit your nearest Family Planning NSW clinic** – www.fpnsw.org.au/clinics
- **Hepatitis Australia** – www.hepatitisaustralia.com or 1800 437 222

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