

Hepatitis C General Information

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by a virus.

Between 50 and 80 per cent of people who are infected with hepatitis C will go on to carry the virus for the rest of their lives. Up to half of these carriers may develop liver cancer or cirrhosis. Cirrhosis is scarring of the liver; damage can be limited if it is diagnosed and treated early.

How is it spread?

You can get hepatitis C through

- exposure to blood and body fluids of someone who has hepatitis C
- sharing drug injection, snorting, or smoking equipment, such as needles, syringes, straws, pipes, cookers, wash, filters, etc.
- blood transfusions, blood products, or organ transplants that took place before 1992 in Canada
- having sex with someone who has hepatitis C; this is rare and usually associated with having multiple sex partners or partners who participate in high-risk activities that may cause hepatitis C

This virus is not spread through casual contact such as

- hugging
- kissing
- sneezing
- coughing

The virus is not found in food or water.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms are usually mild and may include

- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- abdominal pain
- fever
- nausea and vomiting
- yellow skin and eyes (jaundice)

Many people with hepatitis C have no symptoms.

What is the treatment?

Medical treatment is available for hepatitis C but it is lengthy, has side effects, and may not be suitable for all patients.

You should get plenty of rest, follow a proper diet, and avoid alcohol. Talk to your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medication or herbal or homeopathic products. Ask your health-care provider or Public Health about immunization against hepatitis A and B, pneumococcal 23, influenza, and tetanus with pertussis.

How can you prevent hepatitis C from spreading to others?

If you are infected with hepatitis C, you should not

- share personal items, such as toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, earrings, manicure equipment, nail clippers, sex toys, or any article that might have traces of blood
- share drug injection, snorting, or smoking equipment, such as needles, syringes, straws, pipes, cookers, wash, filters, etc.
- donate blood, semen, tissue or organs, or breast milk
- share needles and ink used for tattooing, or share needles used for body piercing and/or body modifications unless properly cleaned and sterilized

You should follow proper disposal procedures for personal care items.

- Put articles with blood on them, such as tampons, pads, tissue, dental floss, and bandages, in a separate, sealed plastic bag before adding them to household garbage.
- Put sharp items, such as razor blades and needles, in a hard-sided container and then tape it shut.

You should take care to prevent blood and other potentially infective body fluids from coming into contact with other individuals.

- Cover open wounds and cuts until healed.
- Clean blood spills appropriately. Wear gloves. Soak up the blood with paper towels, and then dispose of them in a sealed plastic bag. Clean the soiled surface with detergent and water, and then disinfect it with a fresh solution of one part bleach (100 mL) to nine parts water (900 mL). Allow this solution to stay on the surface for 10 minutes before wiping it off.

Although you do not have to disclose your HCV status, there may be times when it is appropriate to do so.

- Informing health-care providers, such as doctors or dentists or others, of disease status may enhance general care and safety.
- There is a low but possible risk of sexual transmission to sex partners. Advise sex partners and practise safe sex [for example, use condoms].

- If you are considering pregnancy, discuss with a health-care provider the risk of transmission to the infant and transmission factors associated with breastfeeding. Transmission of HCV by breastfeeding has not been documented. However, if you are a breastfeeding mother and your nipples are cracked and bleeding, consider abstaining from breastfeeding until they are healed.

You should also be aware of the following:

- There may be risks involved with receiving services from a personal service facility where the skin may be intentionally or unintentionally broken, such as tattooing, piercing, or manicure/pedicure facilities.
- Practise a healthy lifestyle, including limiting or avoiding alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a risk factor for more rapid progression of the disease.
- Prescribed medications, over-the-counter medications, herbal products, or homeopathic products may pose risks as contraindications to those with liver conditions, including HCV. This means the drugs or products may be harmful to those with the condition. Consult a pharmacist before using any of these.