



Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Hepatitis C can cause acute hepatitis and progress to chronic liver disease. About 15-50% of individuals infected by HCV will clear the virus during the acute phase. The other 50-85% will become a chronic carrier and will carry the virus for life. Some of these chronic carriers will develop cirrhosis or liver cancer.

What are the symptoms?

Most people who develop acute hepatitis C have no symptoms and do not know they are infected. If symptoms develop, they usually appear 6-7 weeks after exposure to the virus. During this period, people can have symptoms such as, jaundice (skin and eyes turn yellow), fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, dark urine, joint pain and pain in the stomach area. It is important to note that you can pass the virus on to others even if you have no symptoms.

How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV is mostly spread through contact with infected blood. In Canada, HCV is mainly spread through sharing of needles or drug use equipment.

Hepatitis C is rarely spread through sex, but it may happen if people engage in high risk behavior and where there is a chance of exposure to HCV infected blood.

Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, sharing food or cutlery, or using toilets.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

A blood test is used to identify if you are infected by the HCV. If you think you may be at risk for hepatitis C, you should talk to your healthcare provider and get tested.

How is hepatitis C treated?

Any patient known to have hepatitis C should be referred to a healthcare provider for further assessment and treatment.

To reduce the risk of further damage to the liver, people with hepatitis C should:

- Be immunized against hepatitis A and hepatitis B;
- Minimize alcohol intake;
- Check with a healthcare provider before taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs.

Who is at risk of hepatitis C infections?

The following persons are known to be at increased risk for HCV infection:

- Current or former injection drug users, including those who injected only once many years ago.
- Recipients of blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992, when better testing of donors became available.
- Chronic hemodialysis patients.
- Persons with known exposures to HCV, such as health care workers after needlesticks involving HCV-positive blood.
- Persons engaging in sexual contact with high risk behavior and where there is a chance of exposure to HCV infected blood
- Persons with HIV infection

- Children born to HCV-positive mothers
- Persons having a body piercing, a tattoo or acupuncture using unsterile/shared equipment.

How can hepatitis be prevented?

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV infection. The best way to protect you is to take the following precautions:

- Never share needles or other drug use equipment. Cleaning with bleach may not kill the virus;
- Be cautious about body piercings, tattoos and acupuncture. Make sure single-use, disposable needles are used and that all other equipment is disinfected and sterile;
- Practice safer sex; use condoms and/or dental dams when having vaginal, oral and anal sex;
- If you are likely to be in contact with blood or other bodily fluids in your work take appropriate precautions, such as wearing latex gloves.

If you have hepatitis C:

- Do not donate blood, semen, tissue or organs unless recommended otherwise.
- Be very careful to make sure that other people are not exposed to your blood.
- Cover any wounds with a waterproof bandage.
- Clean up any blood spills with a paper towel and clean thoroughly with detergent and water until no obvious stains are left. Large spills on carpet may need to be shampooed or steam cleaned.

What is the public health response?

Anyone known or suspected to be infected by hepatitis C must be reported to Public Health by their healthcare provider.

If you are diagnosed with hepatitis C, your health-care provider will treat you and give you information on sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI).

A Public Health nurse may contact you to make sure that your partners have been tested and referred for appropriate care and to provide you with tips on how to prevent the spread of hepatitis C and other STBBI. Your partners include any drug use partners. Your long-term partners and children may also need to be tested.

All discussions are strictly confidential.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your health-care provider, local Public Health office or Tele-Care 811 or visit the [government of New Brunswick](#) website.

To find hepatitis C services near you, please visit the [HIV411.ca](#) website