

Hepatitis C (HCV)

What is hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a virus that causes inflammation (swelling) of the liver. In some cases hepatitis C can cause permanent liver damage and can lead to liver cancer. For some people, the virus goes away on its own within six months of infection. Of those infected about 75-85% will have the virus for life and can infect others.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of hepatitis C may appear two weeks to six months after exposure to the virus, but 90% of those infected show no signs of illness.

Symptoms may include:

- Fatigue
- Lethargy
- Muscle and joint pain
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea
- Jaundice (yellowing of skin and eyes)
- Stomach pain
- Fever

How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread through contact with infected blood. It is a strong virus and can live outside of the body for days. Some ways the virus can spread include:

- Sharing drug equipment like needles, straws and pipes
- Medical equipment that has not been cleaned properly between uses
- Pregnancy or childbirth when a mother is hepatitis C positive
- Exposure to, or contact with infected blood through breaks in the skin or in the lining of the nose and mouth
- Using shared or unclean tools used for tattooing, body piercing or acupuncture that pierce the skin
- Unprotected sex where blood could be present
- Sharing personal items like razors or toothbrushes

Hepatitis C is not spread by water, food or casual contact such as hugging, kissing or shaking hands.

How do I know if I have hepatitis C?

A blood test is the only way to find out if you have hepatitis C. Many people who have hepatitis C do not know they have it. Testing can help determine if you have ever been exposed, and if you have the virus.

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C, and not all hepatitis C infections can be cured, but recent advances in medical treatment have led to cure rates of 98%. Careful assessment by a specialist is required to determine if treatment is appropriate.

Adapted from:

- CATIE (www.hepcinfo.ca)
- Health Canada
- Public Health Agency of Canada

