

# Hepatitis C

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the Hepatitis C virus. Approximately 250,000 Canadians are infected with Hepatitis C and up to 44% of people are unaware of their infection. The first 6 months of the infection is called an acute infection, about 25% of people clear the virus on their own during this time. An infection that lasts longer than 6 months is called a chronic infection, this happens in about 75% of infections. Over time, the infection can lead to liver damage and more serious complications such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver), liver cancer, and liver failure.

## What are the symptoms?

Most people do not have any symptoms for many years. The only way to know if you have Hepatitis C is to get tested.

If symptoms do develop, symptoms of an acute infection may include:

- Fatigue or extreme tiredness
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Dark urine
- Pale stools
- Decreased appetite
- Flu-like symptoms
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and/or whites of the eyes)
- Pain or tenderness on the right side of the abdomen

Symptoms of a chronic infection may include:

- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and/or whites of the eyes)
- Buildup of fluid in your abdomen or other body parts (ascites or edema)
- Blood in your stool or vomit

## How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread through blood-to-blood contact. This means that blood infected with the Hepatitis C virus must get into your bloodstream for you to become infected. In Canada today, most Hepatitis C virus infections occur from sharing equipment used for preparing and using drugs, such as needles. Sexual transmission of Hepatitis C is generally considered uncommon, but the risk increases with sex where blood is present, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and condomless sex. People who received blood transfusions, blood products, or organ donation prior to 1990 when Canada implemented screening of the blood supply are also at risk of infection with Hepatitis C. Hepatitis C can also be spread to the baby during pregnancy or delivery about 5% of the time.

## How can I be tested for Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C testing is done through a simple blood test available through your doctor, walk-in clinic, or other health clinic. Testing is done in two stages with a screening test and a confirmatory test. The screening test detects antibodies; antibodies indicate that a person has had Hepatitis C at some point in their life. The confirmatory test detects the Hepatitis C virus itself; this indicates a current infection with the virus.

You should consider Hepatitis C testing if:

- You have used drugs through smoking, snorting, or injection with shared drug use equipment, even if it was only one time
- You were born between 1945 to 1975
- You may have been exposed to non-sterile medical, dental, or personal service equipment through needlestick injuries, unsafe tattooing or piercing, surgeries, acupuncture or other personal care services, or shared personal care items (i.e., toothbrushes or razors)
- You received blood products or organ transplant prior to 1990
- You received an invasive medical procedure (surgical or dental) in a country where infection prevention and control may not be standard
- You were born or lived in or travelled to a country where Hepatitis C rates are high
- You were born to a pregnant person with Hepatitis C
- You have engaged in sexual activity where blood was present
- You have been an inmate at a correctional facility

### How is Hepatitis C treated?

Hepatitis C is a curable infection with treatment curing over 95% of infections. The medications used for treatment are called direct-acting antivirals (DAAs). Treatment generally includes taking medication every day for about 8 to 12 weeks. Most people tolerate the medication very well as DAAs have few adverse effects that are often mild and resolve after a few weeks. After treatment and cure, you will always test positive for Hepatitis C antibodies, but you will no longer have the Hepatitis C virus in your body.

There is no vaccine for Hepatitis C and you do not become immune after infection. This means that even after treatment, it is possible to become infected with the virus again.

### How can I reduce my chance of getting and spreading Hepatitis C?

When engaging in activities that may have a risk of transmission for Hepatitis C, there are many steps that can be taken to reduce this risk. When using drugs through snorting, smoking, or injecting, use new and clean equipment every time you use and do not share equipment with others. Speak to your sexual partners about safe sex and being tested for STIs and bloodborne infections, including HIV, syphilis, and Hepatitis B and C. Practice safe sex by using condoms and lubrication appropriately. Be an informed consumer when getting tattoos, piercings, acupuncture, and other personal services. Ensure you see a professional at an inspected establishment and all equipment is sterile.

If you test positive for Hepatitis C, it is very important to notify anyone who may have been in contact with your blood, such as drug use and sexual partners, to ensure they seek testing and treatment as indicated. See a doctor for treatment and assessment of your liver. If you are pregnant, tell your doctor that you have Hepatitis C and have your baby tested after 18 months of age to rule out infection. Get vaccinated for Hepatitis A and B, these vaccines are free for all people with Hepatitis C.

**For more information, please contact The Clinic at 519-663-5317.**

#### References:

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