

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a long term infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. In Canada an estimated 242,500 people are infected with hepatitis C, and about 1 in 5 people do not know they are infected. Most people infected with hepatitis C virus do not get sick, or only feel ill for a short time. Three out of four people infected with hepatitis C will carry the virus for years. Sometimes, symptoms may not show up for 20 to 30 years, and by this time damage has already been done to the liver. This damage may include cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and/or cancer. A person infected with hepatitis C can spread the infection to others who may become ill.

If symptoms develop, they can include:

- Being really tired, fever, body aches and pains
- Abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Dark urine (tea coloured pee)

How is Hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread through contact with an infected person's blood by:

- Sharing needles, syringes or other drug related equipment even once. This is the most common way hepatitis C is spread from one person to another. At least two out of three people with hepatitis C have a history of injection drug use. Cleaning needles with bleach may not get rid of the virus.
- Sharing needles, ink or other equipment tainted with blood for tattooing or body piercing.
- Sexual contact with infected partners. Sexual contact with an infected person can result in the spread of hepatitis C but this does not happen as often as with other viruses such as hepatitis B and HIV. Sexual spread can happen during rough sex, anal sex, or sex during a hepatitis C positive woman's menstrual period.
- Blood and blood products. Contact with hepatitis C through blood products was more common before June 1992. Since then blood has been screened for hepatitis C and now the chance of getting infected from blood products is very low in Canada.
- Sharing razors, toothbrushes or nail clippers.
- Needle stick injuries

Spread from a mother to her newborn baby can happen in about 1 in 20 cases. The risk of spread from breastfeeding is very low except if the mother's nipples are cracked or bleeding. Hepatitis C is NOT spread through kissing, coughing or sharing eating utensils. Hepatitis C is not found in food or water.

How do I protect myself from getting hepatitis C?

- If you inject drugs, always use new needles and syringes and never share drug related equipment like spoons, water, wash, filters. Never share devices for snorting or smoking drugs like straws and crack pipes. For needle exchange services call Regional HIV/AIDS Connection at 519 434-1601.
- Always get tattoos and body-piercings from a licensed establishment. Be an informed consumer and ask to see the yearly inspection report or call the health unit to make sure the establishment has been inspected. Ask questions: Are needles or ink shared? Is reusable equipment sterilized?
- Practice safer sex by always using a condom for all types of sex.
- Make sure to always use you own toothbrush, razor and nail clippers.
- There is currently no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.

www.healthunit.com

How do I find out if I have hepatitis C?

There is a simple blood test for hepatitis C that is available through your doctor, walk in clinic, or local health clinic. Consider getting tested for hepatitis C if you have:

- Ever shared injection drugs or drug related equipment for injecting or inhaling drugs. Drug use even one time in your life many years ago can put you at risk.
- Have tattoos or piercings that may have been done with unsterile or contaminated equipment.
- Received blood or blood products before 1992.
- Had unprotected sex with a person who has hepatitis C.

What do I do if am positive for hepatitis C?

- If you are positive for the antibody to hepatitis C (anti-HCV), you need a second test called an RNA (or viral load) test to see if you have the virus in your blood. The RNA test is important as some people are able to clear the infection on their own without treatment.
- See your doctor for follow up tests. Depending on the results, your doctor may refer you to a specialized team with experience in treating hepatitis C.
- Let your doctor know if you are taking or planning on taking any prescription or non-prescription drugs (e.g. over the counter medications and herbal remedies).
- Take care of yourself. Getting regular medical checkups, eating a balanced diet, getting enough rest and exercise can all help to keep you healthy.
- If you use drugs, make sure you always use new needles and syringes, and never share needles or other drug related equipment including spoons, water, wash, filters, and devices for smoking and snorting drugs like straws and crack pipes. Make sure you put all your sharps in a hard plastic shell container or metal tin can with a tight fitting, puncture proof lid. For needle exchange services, call Regional HIV AIDS Connection at 519 434-1601.
- Don't donate blood, semen or tissues. You may donate solid organs. Tell your doctor if you made donations while you may have been infected.
- Don't share your razor, toothbrush, nail clippers, or other items that may contain traces of blood.
- Avoid drinking alcohol or cut back on how much you drink since it can worsen long-term liver damage.
- Clean blood spills carefully by soaking the blood with paper towels and then wiping the surface with a bleach solution (1 part bleach to 9 parts water). Leave on the surface for 10 minutes before wiping away. Other people who clean your blood or provide first aid should wear protective gloves and wash their hands well after taking the gloves off.
- Always practice safe sex: use condoms/barrier protection for vaginal, anal and oral sex. If you are in a long-term relationship with one partner, you and your partner should discuss the risks and testing for your partner.
- Tell health professionals who may come in contact with your blood, such as doctors and dentists, that you have hepatitis C.
- If you are pregnant or plan on becoming pregnant, tell the delivering doctor. Your baby can be tested after 18 months of age to rule out infection. Breastfeeding is okay, just make sure you do not breastfeed if your nipples are cracked and bleeding.
- Get tested for other infections like HIV and hepatitis B.
- Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and B if you are not already protected/immune. Talk to your doctor or go to your local Health Unit Immunization Clinic. These vaccines are free for all people with hepatitis C.
- If you are a health care worker or work in a high risk setting, discuss your infection in relation to your work with your health care provider and employer as appropriate.

For more information contact the Communicable Disease Division of the Middlesex-London Health Unit at 519 663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to www.healthunit.com

Other Contacts:

Canadian Liver Foundation website: http://www.liver.ca/Liver_Disease/ Phone: 519 659-0948

CDC website: www.cdc.gov/hepatitis Phone: 1-888-4HEPCDC

References:

American Academy of Pediatrics. Hepatitis C. In: Pickering L,K, Baker CJ, Kimberlin DW, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2012 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 29th ed. 391-395.

Canadian Liver Foundation: Hepatitis C. Retrieved August 26, 2010 from http://www.liver.ca/Liver_Disease/

Public Health Agency of Canada. A-Z Infectious Diseases. Retrieved May 3, 2012 from <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/id-mi/az-index-eng.php#hep>