

# HEPATITIS C

get the facts

## WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is a chronic liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). An estimated 250,000 people in Canada are infected with HCV, and between 3,200 and 5,000 individuals are newly infected with HCV each year.

### ? Why is hepatitis C a health concern?

Initial, or acute, infection with HCV usually shows no symptoms, with less than a quarter of those infected showing symptoms like jaundice (yellowing of the skin and/or eyes) or fatigue. Some individuals will recover from their infection, but 75-85 per cent of those infected will progress to the chronic (carrier) state. Chronic hepatitis C has a silent nature and can remain asymptomatic for decades, but can eventually lead to liver damage, liver cancer and the need for liver transplantation. Approximately 20 per cent (one in five) of those infected with HCV are unaware of their infection.

### ? Could I have hepatitis C?

HCV is spread through contact with infected blood. While many people became infected through blood and blood products in the past, between 70 and 80 per cent of HCV transmission in Canada today is due to injecting drug use and sharing of contaminated needles and other drug-using paraphernalia (e.g., straws, pipes, spoons, cookers, etc.).

### The most common risk factors for HCV infection include:

- Injection drug use (past and/or present) and intranasal drug use (snorting) when sharing contaminated drug-using equipment (e.g., needles, straws, pipes, spoons, cookers, etc.);
- Tattooing, body piercing or acupuncture when unsterile equipment or techniques are used;
- Exposure in the workplace by getting pricked by a needle or sharp equipment that has infected blood on it;
- Exposure, both within and outside Canada, when infection control precautions are not observed and/or during medical or dental procedures that involve the use of contaminated equipment;
- Sharing personal care articles such as razors, scissors, nail clippers, or a toothbrush with an infected person;
- Unprotected sexual activity that includes contact with blood or an exchange of blood with an infected person; and
- Being born to a mother with HCV.

Persons who were exposed to contaminated blood, blood products or organ transplantation prior to 1992 may be at risk.

Hepatitis C is NOT spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing or shaking hands or by

being around someone who is sneezing or coughing. The hepatitis C virus is not found in food or water.

There are medications available to treat HCV which can help to protect from serious liver damage. Early diagnosis is critical because the sooner treatment is started, the better the chance that it may help clear the virus. Treatment can also help lessen damage to the liver and can prevent individuals from spreading the virus to others unknowingly.

### ? How can I find out if I have hepatitis C?

If you think you may be at risk for hepatitis C, you should consult your health care provider who may recommend that you take a simple blood test to determine if you have the virus.

### ? Why do I need my liver?

It's important to keep your liver healthy because it does a lot of things for you. It helps digest food and also stores vitamins and minerals. But most importantly, the liver acts as a filter for chemicals and other substances that enter the body. It's also important in the manufacture of your blood and many proteins.

### ? How can I avoid getting hepatitis C?

The best way to keep yourself safe from hepatitis C infection is to take the following precautions.

- Don't ever share needles/syringes, spoons, drug solutions, water, filters, cookers, pipes, straws used for snorting drugs, and other drug related equipment. Cleaning with bleach may not kill HCV;

- If you are getting a tattoo or planning to have body piercing or acupuncture, check things out first. NEVER allow anyone to use homemade equipment on you or re-use equipment, including needles, ink or jewelry. Only fresh, single-use, disposable needles must be used and all other equipment must be disinfected and sterile. Cleaning with bleach may not kill HCV;
- Wear latex gloves if you are likely to be in contact with someone's blood; and
- In non-monogamous sexual relationships and for new sexual partners - use condoms/dental dams to protect yourself against potential exposure to blood. The risk of sexual transmission of HCV is low but not absent, particularly for those with more than one sex partner, if there are concurrent sexually transmitted infections with open sores present or, during menstruation.

### ? What if I have hepatitis C?

Avoid or limit alcohol consumption.

Medications called interferon and ribavirin can be used to treat hepatitis C. Talk to your health care provider to see if treatment is right for you. Presently, there is no licensed vaccine to prevent HCV infection.

To prevent further damage to your liver, your health care provider may advise vaccination against hepatitis A and hepatitis B. Many provinces and territories provide these vaccinations at no direct cost to you.

### If you have hepatitis C, you may infect others. To prevent spreading the virus:

- Don't share needles/syringes, spoons, drug solutions, water, filters, cookers, pipes, straws used for snorting drugs, and other drug related equipment. Cleaning with bleach may not kill HCV;
- Don't share personal care items such as toothbrushes, scissors, razors or nail clippers that could be contaminated with blood;
- Cover open sores or breaks in your skin; and
- If you have more than one sexual partner, you should use a condom/dental dam. The risk of sexual transmission of HCV is low but not absent, particularly for those with multiple sexual partners, if there are concurrent sexually transmitted infections with open sores present, or during menstruation.

### ! REMEMBER

Hepatitis C is an infection that progresses slowly and for many people treatment is available. It is important to find out if you have HCV so that you can take the necessary steps to protect yourself and others.



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YOU CAN HAVE IT  
AND NOT KNOW IT.

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