

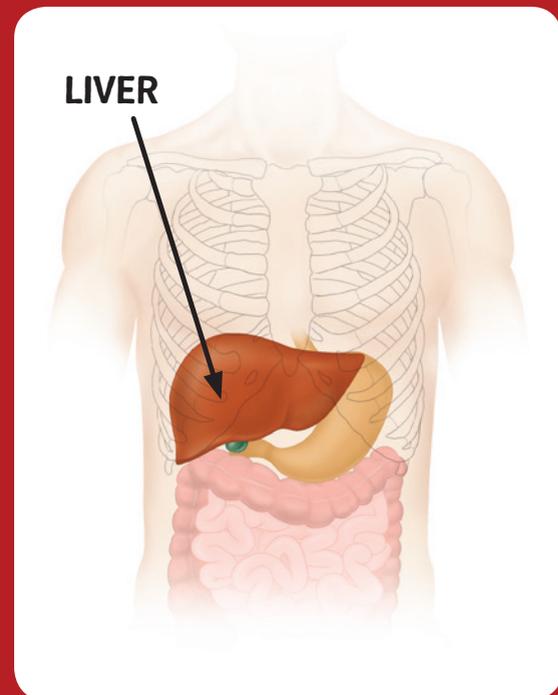
## The liver...

...is the largest organ inside the body, about the size of a football in the average adult. It is on the right side of the body, under the ribs.

The liver is important because it helps the body fight infections, clean toxins (poisons) from the blood, digest food and more.

The liver is very tough and even has the ability to heal itself. Still, Hep C and other viruses, alcohol and some prescription, over-the-counter and street drugs can cause permanent damage to your liver.

**Protecting your liver is important... you cannot live without it!**



## Points to remember:

- Hep C is a virus that lives in the liver. It is spread through different kinds of **blood-to-blood contact**.
- A person can have Hep C for **many years without symptoms**, even though the virus may be damaging the liver.
- The only way to know if a person has Hep C is to **get tested**.
- **There is treatment for Hep C**. New treatments are highly effective at curing the infection.

Contact:  
[www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)  
1-800-263-1638

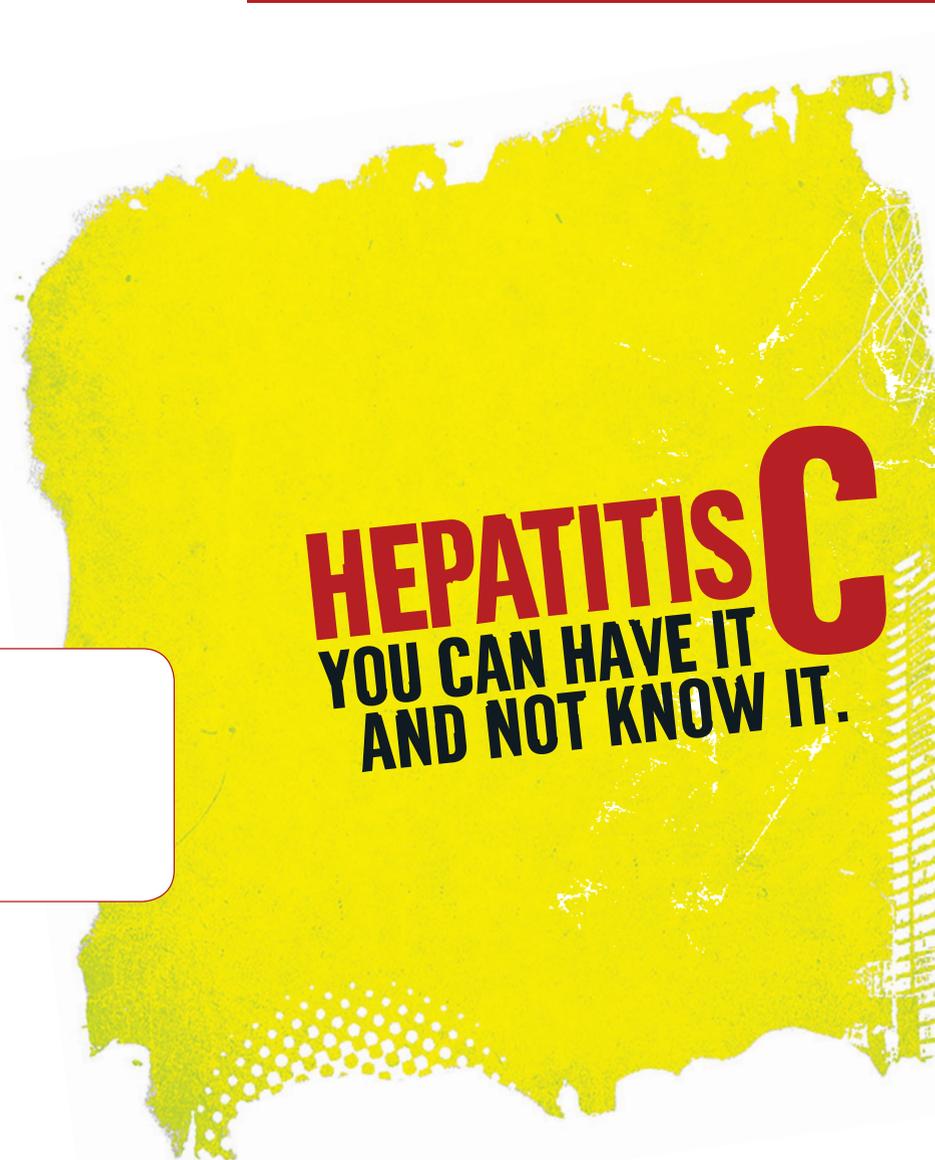


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## Hepatitis C: The Basic Facts



## What is hepatitis C?

**Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus.**

There are different hepatitis (Hep) viruses that affect the liver. The three types that are common in Canada are Hep A, Hep B and Hep C. **This pamphlet is about Hep C.**

People can get Hep C when blood carrying the virus gets into their bloodstream. Once inside, it infects the liver and causes damage to this very important organ. The more damage there is, the harder it is for the liver to do its job and people can become very sick.

For some people who get Hep C, the virus goes away on its own within the first six months after infection. For most people, the virus is still in the body after six months. At this point, Hep C will not go away on its own, but there is treatment that can clear (get rid of) the virus from the body.

**There is no vaccine for Hep C.**

The body can protect itself from many viruses. We call this immunity. It can sometimes do this on its own but it often needs the help of a vaccine.

**There is no vaccine or other immunity against Hep C**, so the only way to prevent Hep C is by avoiding the virus. Even people who get Hep C and clear the virus can get it again.

# Hep C is spread through blood-to-blood contact

Hep C is spread when blood carrying the virus gets into the bloodstream of another person.

- This usually happens through breaks in the skin or breaks in the lining of the nose and mouth.
- Hep C is a strong virus and can live outside of the body for many days. This means that dried blood can also pass the virus.
- **Using drug equipment that has been used by someone else**, such as needles, syringes, filters, cookers, acidifiers, alcohol swabs, tourniquets, water, pipes for smoking crack or crystal meth, and straws for snorting.
- **Getting a blood transfusion or an organ transplant that has not been screened for Hep C.** In Canada, the screening of donated blood and organs for Hep C started in 1990. In some other countries, blood wasn't screened for Hep C until more recently.
- **Re-using tools for activities that break the skin**, such as tattooing, body piercing, acupuncture and electrolysis. In tattooing, reusing needles as well as ink and ink pots can spread Hep C.
- **Re-using medical equipment that should only be used once**, such as needles for vaccines. Medical equipment that has been used with other people and not cleaned properly before being used again can also spread Hep C.
- **Sharing or borrowing personal items that might have blood on them**, such as razors, nail clippers and toothbrushes.
- **During pregnancy or childbirth.** A person who has Hep C can pass the virus to their baby during pregnancy or childbirth.
- **Having condomless sex where blood could be present.** For example, during anal sex, rough sex, sex during menstruation or when one person has open sores.

**It is possible to have Hep C and another virus, such as HIV or Hep B. This is called co-infection and it can make the damage that Hep C does to your liver worse.**

- HIV and Hep B can pass from one person to another in the same ways as Hep C.
- **HIV** can also get into the body through semen (cum and pre-cum), anal fluid, vaginal fluid and breast milk.
- **Hep B** can also get into the body through semen (cum and pre-cum) and vaginal fluid. There is a vaccine to prevent Hep B. In Canada, children and some adults can get this vaccine for free.

# Stages of liver damage

Without treatment, damage to the liver gets worse over time.

These are the stages of liver damage:

- **Hep C infection.** The Hep C virus enters the bloodstream, is carried to the liver and infects liver cells.
- **Inflammation.** Infected liver cells become damaged and some cells die. This causes the liver to swell. Most people won't even know this is happening.
- **Fibrosis.** Over time, scars may form on the liver. This is called fibrosis. How much fibrosis there is usually depends on how long a person has been infected with Hep C.
- **Cirrhosis.** As fibrosis increases over many years, the liver can harden and shrink. This is an advanced form of liver disease called cirrhosis.
- **Liver cancer or liver failure.** After a long period of time, people may get liver cancer or the liver can stop working (called liver failure).

# Testing is the only way to find out if you have Hep C

There are close to 250,000 people living with chronic Hep C in Canada. Many people who have Hep C don't know it.

**Most people do not show any signs or symptoms until many years after getting Hep C.**

- If and when people do have symptoms, they are very general and may feel like other illnesses.
- As the liver becomes more damaged, symptoms may include feeling tired all the time, body aches, dry and itchy skin, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness and confusion (called "brain fog") or a yellowing of the skin and eyes (called jaundice).

**The only way to really know is to get tested.**

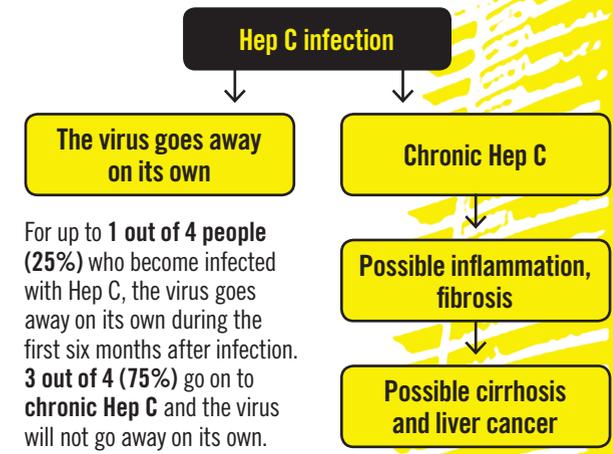
- If you think someone else's blood could have made its way into your body—even one time—

or you feel unwell, visit your doctor or a health centre to talk about getting tested.

**It takes two tests to know if you have Hep C.**

Unlike some other viruses, **there are two separate blood tests for Hep C:**

- **The first test: Hep C antibody testing** is used to see if a person has ever come in contact with Hep C. When Hep C first enters the bloodstream, the immune system in the body produces antibodies against the virus. The Hep C antibody test looks for Hep C antibodies in the blood. A **negative** test result means that a person has never come in contact with Hep C.
- A **positive** test result means that a person came in contact with Hep C at some point. But, antibodies stay in the body even when someone clears the virus. Follow-up testing is important: The second test shows if the virus is still in the body.
- **The second test: Virus testing** (called a PCR test, a viral load test or an RNA test) checks for active Hep C infection. A **negative** virus test result means that a person does not have Hep C. A **positive** test result means that a person does have Hep C.



**But remember, there is treatment for Hep C. New treatments are highly effective at curing the infection.**