

# Hepatitis C

You can have it and not know it.



[www.healthcanada.ca/hepc](http://www.healthcanada.ca/hepc)

## What is HEPATITIS C ?

Hepatitis C is an infectious virus that is carried in the blood and affects the liver. It's an infection that is increasing in Canada and around the world. An estimated 5,000 individuals in Canada – mostly young people – get this virus each year.

## Why is hepatitis C a health concern?

While not identified until 1989, the hepatitis C virus has been around for a very long time. Many infected people do not know they have the virus because for some, there will be no symptoms and for others, the symptoms may not show up for 20 to 30 years. During this time, they can spread the virus to others.

You may not know you have this virus until damage has already been done to your liver. That's why you need to know if you're at risk.

## Could I have hepatitis C ?

Like HIV and hepatitis B, hepatitis C is spread through contact with the blood of infected people.

This can happen if you:

- Ever, even once, shared needles, straws used for snorting drugs, pipes, spoons and other drug-related equipment. (This virus was around when sharing such equipment was common in the 1960s and 1970s.) Cleaning with bleach may not kill the hepatitis C virus.
- Got a tattoo or had body piercing or acupuncture where the operator used unsterile equipment or techniques.
- Were pricked by a needle that had infected blood on it (this could happen in the workplace).
- Were born to a mother who has hepatitis C.
- Underwent a medical or dental procedure or any skin-breaking ritual in a country with a high hepatitis C rate and/or where the blood supply is not tested for hepatitis C.

It is possible that hepatitis C can be spread if you have ever shared personal household articles such as a razor or toothbrush with an infected person.

People who had blood transfusions in Canada before 1990 may have been exposed to the virus.

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 virus is not found in food or water.

## 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 doctor who may recommend that you take a simple blood test to determine if you have the virus.

## What can happen to people with hepatitis C ?

The illness begins almost like a 'flu' with fatigue, a fever, body aches and pains, and perhaps nausea and vomiting. The urine may become dark brown. In severe infections, the skin or the eyes may turn yellow (jaundice).

Although people who get hepatitis C may not have symptoms, or feel ill for only a short time, they may carry the hepatitis C virus in their bloodstream and be infectious for years. You may have hepatitis C and not realize it because it is difficult to know when you are in the first or "acute" phase. In the majority of cases, hepatitis C progresses to a "chronic" stage which lasts for a long time, perhaps a person's whole life. The worst effect of this is a condition called "cirrhosis" which results in severe damage to the liver. A small number of people may get liver cancer.

## Your liver and why you need it

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 important, the liver acts as a filter for chemicals and other substances that enter the body, including toxins in the air that we breathe and in what we eat and drink. It is 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 is to avoid the risks.

- Don't share drug needles or drug-related equipment, ever.
- Wear latex gloves if you are likely to be in contact with someone's blood.
- If you have sex with more than one partner, you should use a condom.
- 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 the hepatitis C virus.

## What if I have hepatitis C ?

Do not consume alcohol.

There are medications called interferon and ribavirin that can be used to treat hepatitis C. However, you need to discuss with your doctor whether you are a good candidate for such treatment. There is no vaccination against hepatitis C.

To prevent further damage to your liver, your doctor may advise you to be vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B. Many provinces and territories provide these vaccinations at no cost to you.

If you have hepatitis C, you may infect others.

To keep from spreading the virus:

- Don't share needles, straws, pipes or any other drug-related equipment.
- Don't share toothbrushes, razors or any other ordinary personal item that could be contaminated with your blood.
- Cover open sores or breaks in your skin.
- If you have more than one sex partner, you should use a condom. The risk of sexual transmission of the hepatitis C virus is low, but not absent, particularly for those with more than one sex partner, if there is a history of sexually transmitted disease and/or open sores are present or, if menstruating.

## REMEMBER :

Hepatitis C can be treated. It is important to find out if you have the virus so you can take the necessary steps to minimize the effects.

For more information, visit [www.healthcanada.ca/hepc](http://www.healthcanada.ca/hepc)

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