



# Hepatitis C

The facts



## What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital part of the body. If it does not work properly, it can cause serious illness or sometimes even death.

Drinking alcohol or taking drugs can cause hepatitis. It can also be caused by a viral infection. There are several types of viral hepatitis including A, B, C, D and E.

All these viruses cause similar problems but are spread in different ways. So the ways to prevent people from getting the virus are different too.

This pamphlet is about hepatitis C only.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

In many cases people who have hepatitis C may not feel ill. Others may experience a minor ‘flu-like’ illness that does not require treatment. When first infected with the hepatitis C virus some people may find their urine becomes dark and their eyes and their skin may turn yellow (jaundice). These symptoms may disappear within a few weeks but this does not necessarily mean that the infection has also gone. If you have hepatitis symptoms, or think you have been put at risk, you should consult your doctor. A blood test can determine if you have hepatitis C.

When liver inflammation lasts more than six months the illness is called chronic hepatitis C.

The symptoms of chronic hepatitis C may be:

- mild to severe lethargy (tiredness)
- loss of appetite
- nausea and vomiting
- soreness in the upper right part of the belly (under the ribs)
- fever, or
- pain in the joints

## Is hepatitis C dangerous?

Over 70 per cent of people who have been infected may continue to carry the virus in their blood and become long term or chronic carriers. It is believed that up to 15 to 20 per cent of people who are chronic carriers will develop cirrhosis, which is scarring of the liver. This may take 20 years to develop. After some years, a small number of people with cirrhosis may develop liver cancer.

Carriers of hepatitis C remain infectious throughout their lives and can spread the virus to others if they do not take care.

## How is hepatitis C spread?

### Blood

The hepatitis C virus is present in the blood of an infected person. If infected blood enters another person's blood stream, that person may get the virus.

The most common way people can get hepatitis C in Australia is by sharing drug-injecting equipment such as needles, syringes and spoons.

Hepatitis C can also be spread by:

- using instruments such as tattooing and body piercing equipment that have not been properly cleaned and sterilised.
- sharing toothbrushes, razor blades or any personal item that could draw blood is risky if a carrier has used it.
- one person's blood coming into contact with open cuts on another person.

People who receive blood transfusions in Australia have a very low risk of getting hepatitis C because blood donations have been tested for the virus since February 1990.

## **Sex**

There's a very small risk of getting hepatitis C during sex. However, the risk may be greater if there is bleeding, for example, during a period.

## **Mother to baby**

Mothers who are carriers may on rare occasions pass hepatitis C to their babies during pregnancy or at the time of birth. There is little risk of a baby getting the virus from breast milk.

## How can I avoid becoming infected with hepatitis C?

At present there is no vaccine available to prevent a person from being infected with hepatitis C.

- Do not share personal items such as toothbrushes, razors, nail files or nail scissors, as these can puncture the skin and become contaminated.
- If you are involved in body piercing, tattooing, electrolysis or acupuncture, always ensure that any instrument that pierces the skin has been cleaned and sterilised since it was last used.
- Health care workers should follow standard infection control guidelines.
- Wherever possible, wear single-use gloves if you give someone first aid or clean up blood or body fluids.
- Use safe sex practices. Use condoms every time you have anal, oral or vaginal sex. People who have hepatitis C and who are in long-term stable relationships need to consider and discuss condom use with their doctor.

### **For people who inject drugs:**

- Always wash your hands before and after injecting.
- Never share needles and syringes. Other equipment such as spoons, swabs, filters, tourniquets and water can also be contaminated. Always use new needles and syringes. These are available from some chemists and Needle and Syringe Program outlets. For further information on where to obtain new needles and syringes or, if necessary, how to clean them, contact DIRECTLINE on 1800 888 236. This is also an information referral and counselling telephone line for people who have a problem with alcohol and other drugs.

### **Cleaning and removal of blood spills:**

- wear single-use gloves and use paper towels to mop up the blood spill and dispose of used paper towels in a plastic bag.
- wash area with warm water and detergent, rinse and dry.
- place used gloves into plastic bag, seal and dispose of it in a rubbish bin.
- wash hands in warm soapy water and dry thoroughly.

## Is there a test for hepatitis C?

**Yes.** Having an antibody test tells you whether or not you have been infected with hepatitis C.

It may take two to three months (or sometimes longer) from the time of infection before a blood test can detect antibodies to hepatitis C.

If you have a positive hepatitis C antibody test, specialised laboratories can do an additional test called hepatitis C PCR to determine if the virus is still present in your blood or liver.

## What should I do if I already have hepatitis C?

Some people who have hepatitis C choose to make important changes to their lives, such as reducing alcohol intake, maintaining a well balanced diet that is low in fat and considering their overall health maintenance.

### **You should also:**

- consult your doctor who will monitor your condition and, if necessary, refer you to a specialist.
- consider being immunised against other hepatitis viruses for which there are vaccines (ie hepatitis A and hepatitis B).
- consider discussing your condition with your health care provider when undergoing any medical or dental procedure, though there is no legal obligation to do so.
- completely cover any cut or wound with a waterproof dressing.
- practise safe sex.

### **If you have hepatitis C you should not:**

- donate blood or body organs
- share injecting equipment, or
- share personal items such as toothbrushes or razors.

## Is there treatment for hepatitis C?

New combination treatment with the medicines interferon and ribavirin has greatly improved outcomes for people with hepatitis C. These treatments can help decrease inflammation in the liver and can clear the virus in 30 to 65 percent of people. There are some side effects related to hepatitis C medicines. It is important to talk to your doctor about treatment options.

Some people who have hepatitis C have chosen to use complementary therapies to manage the side effects of combination medicines.

## Hepatitis C discrimination

People with hepatitis C have the same rights as other people and should not be discriminated against.

State and Federal Law prohibits discrimination in the areas of employment, education, accommodation, the provision of goods, services and facilities, buying or selling property, membership of clubs and administration of Commonwealth and State programs. If you believe that you or someone you know has been discriminated against because of hepatitis C infection, you should contact the Equal Opportunity Commission.

## More information

To find out more about hepatitis C contact:

### Hepatitis C Helpline

Telephone (03) 9349 1111

Country Calls 1800 800 241

Vietnamese Info Line 1800 456 007

or

### Hepatitis C Council of Victoria

Suite 5, 200 Sydney Road

Brunswick 3056

Victoria, Australia

Tel: (03) 9380 4644

Rural: 1800 703 003

Fax: (03) 9380 4688

## Foreign language versions

This publication is also available on the Internet in English as well as community languages at:

<http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/phd/hepc>

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