

HEPATITIS C

WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that affects the liver.

HOW COULD I GET THIS?

You can get hepatitis C by coming in contact with infected blood. There are several possible ways that the virus in that blood finds a way into your bloodstream:

Common ways are:

- receiving blood and/or blood products, immunoglobulin or surgery prior to 1990;
- using a needle for injecting drugs or steroids, even once, at any time in your life;
- sharing any equipment for snorting drugs such as straws, rolled bills, cracked pipes etc.;

Less common ways are:

- having sexual contact with a partner infected with hepatitis C;
- having tattoos, body piercing;
- having a blood contact and/or needlestick injuries (i.e. Healthcare and emergency response workers);
- spouses of people infected with hepatitis C (through sex and shared personal hygiene articles)
- Children born to infected mothers (childbirth).

WHAT CAN HEPATITIS C DO TO ME?

Some people will "clear" the virus with no ill effects. But the majority will remain chronically infected for life. Often there are no symptoms until very late in the course of the disease. It is a slow and silent virus that may take 20 or 30 years to cause liver damage. Hepatitis C is a major health concern because it can cause long-term liver damage and can be fatal in some cases by causing cirrhosis and liver cancer. Most people with hepatitis C will remain well. A common symptom is fatigue. Those people who may progress to more serious illness may have some of the following symptoms:

- jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyeballs)
- abdominal pain and swelling
- nausea, vomiting and digestive problems
- rarer may be problems with the skin, blood, kidneys and autoimmune system.

HOW IS HEPATITIS C TREATED?

Antiviral treatments are available, but can only be administered by medical professionals with specific training in hepatitis C care and management. Ensure a doctor is regularly monitoring you and providing you with health care and access to specialists.

DOES THE TREATMENT WORK?

With the new anti-viral treatments, hepatitis C can be cured in 40% to 50% of cases. Research is ongoing. Your doctor can discuss treatment options with you. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

**For more information
or for other sexual
health fact sheets,
contact the
Sexual Health Info Line**



Tel: (613) 563-2437

Fax: (613) 560-6096



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HEPATITIS C

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CAN I GIVE HEPATITIS C TO OTHER PEOPLE?

Hepatitis C is a very strong virus which can survive for extended periods of time outside of the body even in very small amounts of blood. Habits and practices that involve ANY contact with ANY amount of blood are potential risks for transmission. Even though an infected person may look and feel healthy, they can still transmit the virus to others.

- do not let others touch or handle blood without wearing gloves
- clean blood spills using bleach
- practice good basic hygiene; do not share toothbrushes, razors or nail cutters
- never share needles or other equipment for injecting drugs or steroids
- never share equipment for snorting drugs such as straws, rolled bills, crack pipes, etc.
- practice safer sex; always use a condom during sexual intercourse
- in a long term, monogamous relationship, the risk of sexual transmission is low; the risk is increased if there is sex causing bleeding, anal sex or sex during a woman's menstrual period; discuss this with your partner; your partner may want to be tested
- advise health professionals that you have hepatitis C
- do not donate blood, organs, tissues or sperm

WHAT CAN I DO?

Learn more and take charge of your health. Talk to your doctor or public health agency. Contact the Hepatitis C Society, Canadian Liver Foundation and attend meetings with other people who have hepatitis C. Remember you are not alone.

- ensure a doctor is regularly monitoring you and providing you with health care and access to specialists
- discuss treatment with your doctor; disease progression varies for each person, you may or may not require treatment
- there is no specific diet to follow; eat well and healthy; the Canada Food Guide can be a good resource
- restrict/avoid alcohol; it can worsen or accelerate liver damage
- discuss with your doctor before taking "over the counter" medications and herbal supplements as some medications may be hard on the liver
- discuss the need for hepatitis B and hepatitis A vaccine; another hepatitis infection on top of hepatitis C can produce serious or fatal consequences
- the City of Ottawa, Public Health Branch offers free hepatitis B vaccine to anyone with hepatitis C. Hepatitis A vaccine has now been approved by Ontario Drug Benefits (section 8), for anyone with hepatitis C.
- education and counselling is available; consult list for resources and information

USEFUL WEBSITES

- The Hepatitis Information Network = HepNet: www.hepnet.com
- Canadian Liver Foundation: www.liver.ca
- Health Canada website: www.hc-sc.gc.ca

Call any of the following for more information:

City of Ottawa Aids-Sexual Health Info Line
563-2437

- ▶ Canadian Liver Foundation
1-800-563-5483
- ▶ The Hepatitis C Society of Canada
1-800-652-4372
- ▶ Canadian Liver Foundation
Ottawa Chapter 733-1433
- ▶ The Ontario Hepatitis C Assistance Plan
1-877-222-4977
- ▶ The Federal Hepatitis C Assistance Plan
1-888-780-1111