

Checking it out

The only way to see if you have hepatitis C is with a blood test. As this test doesn't usually pick up new infections, if your result is negative, you will need to have the test again in 4 to 6 months' time. This test only shows that you have ever been infected. It can't show if you've become a carrier and can spread hepatitis C.

There is another test that may be able to tell if the virus is still in your blood or liver, but isn't routine, and is expensive.

If you already have hepatitis C...

You need to work with your doctor to look after yourself. Make sure you have a doctor you are happy with and who has a good understanding of hepatitis C.

Treatment is available for hepatitis C. The treatment cures around 8 out of every 10 people depending on the type of hepatitis C. A healthy diet, enough sleep, and avoiding alcohol, tobacco and other drugs are also important. You are also responsible for not spreading hepatitis C to anyone else.

Even if you are already infected with hepatitis C, you can still catch a different type of the hepatitis C virus. If you have been treated, you can catch hepatitis C again. You always need to protect yourself against hepatitis C. You also need to minimise the risk of catching other liver infections, such as hepatitis A and hepatitis B. Ask your doctor about hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccination.

Where to go

Contact your GP or a doctor of your choice
or

Hepatitis Council of WA Inc
(08) 9328 8538 or 1800 800 070 toll free

HealthInfo 1300 135 030

Sexual Health Helpline
(08) 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 toll free

You can find more information about hepatitis
on the Internet:

www.population.health.wa.gov.au

www.hepatitiswa.com.au

www.hepnet.com

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis

www.digestive.niddk.nih.gov



Sexual Health and Blood-borne Virus Program

© Department of Health 2006

HP 3211

HEPATITIS C
HEPATITIS C
HEPATITIS C
HEPATITIS C
HEPATITIS C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis means sickness of the liver. It can be caused by viruses such as hepatitis A, B, C, D, E and G, alcohol, some chemicals and drugs.

Signs and symptoms

Many people don't have any symptoms at first, or have a minor, flu-like illness. In some cases, the person's urine becomes dark, and their skin and eyes turn yellow (jaundice). Hepatitis symptoms can disappear within a few weeks but this does not always mean that the infection has also disappeared. **Anyone with hepatitis symptoms should see a doctor.**

When the liver is sick (inflamed) for more than 6 months, the illness is called *long-term* or *chronic* hepatitis.

Symptoms of chronic hepatitis C include:

- mild to severe tiredness
- loss of appetite
- feeling unwell and vomiting
- soreness under the ribs
- fever
- joint pain.

If you or your child develops these symptoms, see your doctor for a blood test.

How serious is hepatitis C?

About 8 out of every 10 people with hepatitis C become chronic carriers. Around 1 in every 5 of these chronic carriers will develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver so it can't work properly. This can take 20 years or more. Some people with cirrhosis develop liver cancer.

Carriers of hepatitis C are infectious for the rest of their lives, so they can pass on the infection to others at any time.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne infection. It's passed on by blood-to-blood contact, when infected blood enters another person's bloodstream.

In Australia, most hepatitis C infections result from the sharing of needles and other equipment used for injecting drugs. You can catch hepatitis C even from sharing needles or other equipment only once.

There are other ways that you can catch hepatitis C. These include:

- A needlestick injury in a health care setting. The risk of catching hepatitis C from a needle found in a community setting, such as in the park, is very, very low.
- Getting any body art, such as tattooing or piercing, when the equipment isn't sterile.
- Having unprotected sex involving blood or damage to the skin, such as anal sex and/or unprotected sex with a woman during her period. The risk of infection through penile-vaginal sex at other times is probably low.
- Sharing personal items that can have traces of blood on them, such as razors, toothbrushes and dental floss.

- There is a low risk of an infected mother passing on hepatitis C to her baby either during pregnancy, or at birth. There is almost no risk from breast milk.

In Australia, you are very unlikely to get hepatitis C through blood transfusion or organ transplantation.

You can't catch Hepatitis C from everyday social contact, such as shaking hands, kissing, or sharing a bathroom or toilet, or by donating blood.

Protecting yourself

There is no vaccine against hepatitis C.

However, there are ways you can reduce the risk of catching hepatitis C:

- **Don't inject drugs.** If you do, never share needles, syringes, filters, water or spoons. Wash your hands or swab your fingers before touching another person's injection site. Always use new clean needles and syringes. You can get these from most chemists, needle and syringe exchange outlets, and at some country hospitals after hours.
- **Practice safe sex - use a condom or dental dam, and lubricant.** The risk increases if you have many partners, anal sex and/or sex during a woman's period.
- **Before considering any body art** (such as tattooing or piercing) make sure the body artist uses only sterilised equipment, and new razors and needles each time.
- **Don't share personal hygiene items**, such as razors, toothbrushes and dental floss.
- Health care workers should always use infection control procedures at work.