

# HEPATITIS C, HEPATITIS B & HIV/AIDS

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne viral disease that causes inflammation of the liver. Symptoms of acute hepatitis C include jaundice, dark urine, flu-like illness and abdominal pain. However, many people with hepatitis C have no signs of infection. Hepatitis symptoms may disappear in a few weeks but this does not mean that the infection has also disappeared. Symptoms of chronic hepatitis C (ie infection lasting more than 6 months) include tiredness and lack of energy, abdominal pain, loss of appetite and joint pain.

It has been estimated that if 100 people are infected with hepatitis C at the same time:

- About 25 will get rid of the virus within 2 to 6 months. These people will retain antibodies for some time. People who clear the virus are not immune to hepatitis C and they may be reinfected with the virus.
- 75 people will develop chronic hepatitis. Of these:
  - 20 people will not develop liver damage or show any symptoms
  - Approximately 50 to 60 people will develop some long term symptoms or signs of liver damage (on average 15 years after infection). Of these:
    - 5 to 20 people will develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver (on average 30 years after infection). Of these:
      - 2 to 5 people experience liver failure or cancer (25 to 50 years after infection).

## How is hepatitis C transmitted?

Hepatitis C is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact with an infected person. Transmission occurs when blood from an infected person enters the bloodstream of another person. In Australia it is estimated that over 90% of new hepatitis C infections are the result of injecting drug use, which may involve the sharing of needles and syringes as well as other injecting paraphernalia. Other modes of transmission include non-sterile tattooing or body piercing, sharing personal equipment (ie razors and toothbrushes) that may be contaminated with blood, occupational needlestick injury, or exposure to blood spills through sport or fighting. Hepatitis C may also be transmitted from mother to baby during pregnancy or delivery. Hepatitis C is not classified as a sexually transmitted infection (STI). However, sexual transmission is possible if blood-to-blood contact occurs during sexual activity.

## What is hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a blood-borne viral disease that causes inflammation of the liver. Symptoms of acute hepatitis B include jaundice, dark urine, flu-like illness and abdominal pain. However, many people with hepatitis B have no signs of infection. Most adults clear the hepatitis B virus from the body and are immune to further infection. People with chronic hepatitis B infection are known as *carriers*. Most carriers do not have any symptoms but are able to transmit the virus. Many carriers of hepatitis B remain healthy, but a small proportion, in the long term, will develop chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis or liver cancer. Chronic infection occurs in 5 to 10% of people who have been infected as adults.

## How is it transmitted?

Hepatitis B is transmitted through blood-to-blood or unsafe sexual contact with an infected person. Hepatitis B may also be transmitted from mother to baby at birth. Blood-to-blood contact may occur through injecting drug use, non-sterile tattooing or body piercing, sharing personal equipment that may be contaminated with blood, occupational needlestick injury, or exposure to blood spills.

## What is HIV/AIDS?

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a blood-borne virus that affects the immune system. People with HIV may have no signs of infection. Some initial signs (known as seroconversion illness) include flu-like symptoms, swollen lymph nodes/glands or a rash. Once a person is infected with HIV they remain infectious for life. People with HIV may feel healthy for many years. However, as the virus attacks the immune system, the body is less able to fight off infections and some cancers. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a later stage of HIV infection.

## How is it transmitted?

HIV is transmitted through blood-to-blood or unsafe sexual contact with an infected person. HIV may also be transmitted from mother to baby during pregnancy, birth or breast feeding. Blood-to-blood contact may occur through injecting drug use, non-sterile tattooing or body piercing, sharing personal equipment that may be contaminated with blood, occupational needlestick injury or exposure to blood spills.

## How can I prevent BBV transmission?

- Do not share needles, syringe, filters, spoon, water or tourniquets
- Wash hands before and after injecting drugs
- Always practice safe sex – use a condom/dental dam and water-based lubricant every time during anal, vaginal or oral sex.
- Always use sterile, single-use equipment when tattooing, body piercing or undertaking any form of skin penetration
- Do not share personal grooming items such as toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, tweezers or hair clippers
- Always follow Standard Precautions (eg wash hands, wear gloves) against potential contact with blood and body fluids
- Follow the “Blood Rule” during sport
- Be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B

## Further information can be accessed at the Department of Health website:

<http://www.population.health.wa.gov.au/communicable>

or:

NSP Senior Program Officer Telephone: (08) 9388 4841

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