

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by chemicals, alcohol and drugs, and infection by viruses.

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C means an infection with the hepatitis C virus, one of a range of viruses that can damage the liver.

What are the symptoms?

The effects of hepatitis C vary from one person to another. Some people may have no symptoms. Some may become jaundiced (yellow) with dark urine, nausea, tiredness and generally feel unwell. Others may have mild symptoms such as abdominal discomfort, tiredness and nausea.

What happens in the long-term?

Up to three quarters of those infected will not be able to clear the virus from their body, despite a healthy immune system. They will develop chronic hepatitis, with or without symptoms. Some people with chronic hepatitis will develop scarring (cirrhosis) of the liver. Damage such as this to the liver over a long period may cause liver cancer.

How do you get hepatitis C?

We do not know everything about how hepatitis C is transmitted. However, it is almost always spread by blood or bodily fluids from one person to another. People at increased risk of infection with this virus include:

- people who have injected drugs in the past,
- people who are currently injecting drugs,
- people who received blood transfusions before February 1990,
- people with occupational exposure to blood.

However, about 10% of people with hepatitis C have no obvious risk factor. Spread by sexual activity is possible, but the risk is thought to be small, unless the partner is acutely infected.

Spread from mother to infant during pregnancy is also possible, but is thought to be very uncommon.

How do I know if I have hepatitis C?

A blood test for hepatitis C is available for people who may be at risk. A positive result

means that you have come into contact with the virus and have developed antibodies to the virus. It does not tell you if the virus is still in your bloodstream.

A newer test is available to detect active infection, but there is no Medicare rebate. It may take several or many weeks from the time of infection until the blood test becomes positive.

If you have any concerns that you may be at risk of hepatitis C infection, you should talk about it with your doctor. S/he will explain what tests need to be done, how likely it is that you are infected, the extent of any liver damage, the need for follow-up and possible treatment options.

How do we stop hepatitis C spreading?

If you are infected, learning how to reduce the risk of spread to others and how to reduce the damage of the infection to your body is important.

In general, the following guidelines will help prevent transmission of hepatitis C.

- Wipe up blood spills with household bleach.

- Cover cuts with waterproof dressings.
- Do not share any injecting equipment and avoid getting blood on your fingers and hands.
- Have body piercing and tattooing done at shops that use good methods of sterilisation.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes or nail scissors.
- Avoid sex that involves blood to blood contact.
- Advise your doctor and dentist of your infection.
- Do not donate blood, sperm or body organs if you have hepatitis C.

You may wish to contact your local hepatitis C support group. Or, you can contact the Hep C Info and Support Line on 1800 803 990.