

## Hepatitis C

### Overview

Hepatitis C is a virus that infects the liver. The word “hepatitis” means “inflammation of the liver”. Hepatitis C can affect the way the liver functions, leading to jaundice (yellowing of the skin), nausea, abdominal discomfort, and feeling unwell. Sometimes, however, in the early stages there may be no symptoms and the person may not even know they are infected.

It is spread by exposure to blood, for example, by sharing injecting, piercing, or tattooing equipment, and there is no vaccine against it.

One in four infected people successfully clears the virus from their system. If this does not happen, the virus persists and the person remains infectious. In some people who continue to carry the virus, the immune system damages the liver while it attempts to destroy the virus. Over time, this can lead to cirrhosis of the liver, and even liver cancer, and death.

There are six different strains of the virus, known as genotypes. Being infected with one strand does not protect you against infection with another strand.

### Cause

Hepatitis C (HCV) is one of a number of viruses that target the liver. It is spread by being exposed to blood from an infected person. Tattooing, piercing, and sharing needles are high risk for transferring the virus. Mothers can pass the infection to their babies during childbirth, but the risk is low (one in 20).

Australia screens blood products before they are used in medical procedures, which minimises the risk of transferring the virus, but in countries with poor sterilisation processes and poor screening of blood products, the infection can be passed during a medical procedure or blood transfusion. It is rarely passed by having sex with an infected person.

### Symptoms

Many people infected with hepatitis C have no symptoms, although they are infectious and may be experiencing liver damage.

Symptoms can occur, and may include:

- Flu-like symptoms, headache, fatigue, and aches and pains.
- Nausea, poor appetite.
- Discomfort in the right upper quadrant of the abdomen.
- Dry mouth, dry eyes.
- Excessive tiredness, mood swings, difficulty concentrating.
- The symptoms can come and go or fluctuate over time.
- Yellow skin and eyes, pale stools, dark urine, itching (these usually occur in the setting of acute hepatitis C or with advanced liver disease).

### Diagnosis

The diagnosis can be confirmed with tests, specifically:

- Blood tests for antibodies against the hepatitis C virus.
- Blood tests to identify which strand, or strands, of hepatitis C is in the bloodstream.
- Blood tests known as liver function tests.
- Imaging of the liver, such as an ultrasound, to look for damage or cancer.
- Liver biopsy, where a small sample of the liver tissue is taken for analysis to determine how much damage has been done to the cells.

### Treatment

Prevention is the best treatment: avoid contact with blood and never share injecting equipment.

If you are infected, your doctor should refer you to a specialist or specialist clinic with expertise in treating hepatitis C.

There are medications that can help — pegylated interferon injections and ribavirin tablets. While these medications have side effects, in most cases these are manageable. With current treatments, chronic hepatitis C can be cured in at least 50% of all cases.

Over the next decade, even better treatments are likely to be available that should offer a cure to the majority (more than 75%) of patients with hepatitis C.

However, evidence of previous exposure in the blood will persist for decades. You will not be able to donate blood once you have had hepatitis C, even if the virus is no longer detectable by the most sensitive laboratory tests.

### Lifestyle and diet

A healthy diet, regular exercise, and good sleep habits are very important for people with hepatitis C.

It is especially important to avoid things that may further damage the liver. Specifically:

- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.
- Don't drink alcohol on a daily basis or in binges.
- Always tell your doctor you have hepatitis C before starting a new medication. If the medication has the potential to damage the liver, there may be another alternative or perhaps a lower dose can be used.

People with hepatitis C can take steps to protect those around them, such as not sharing injecting equipment, piercing or tattooing equipment, razor blades, and toothbrushes, not donating blood, and using condoms when they have sex.

Complementary therapies that are used by some people with hepatitis C include acupuncture, Chinese traditional medicine, and herbs such as St Mary's Thistle (*Silybum marianum*, also known as Milk Thistle), licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*), and CH100. It is not yet known how effective, or otherwise, these therapies are. However, none of these medications eradicate the virus from the blood.

Make sure your doctor knows what complementary medicines you are using, as sometimes these can interfere with mainstream therapies. Likewise, make sure

your complementary therapist knows you have hepatitis C, as some treatments — such as black cohosh — have the potential to damage the liver.

Joining a support group can help people with hepatitis C find support and information.

Always see your doctor promptly if your symptoms are getting worse.

### Support and resources

- For additional support and resources, visit: Hepatitis Australia [www.hepatitisaustralia.com](http://www.hepatitisaustralia.com)

[It'sMyHealth.com.au](http://It'sMyHealth.com.au)