



Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Hepatitis C can cause acute hepatitis and progress to chronic liver disease. About 15-50% of individuals infected by HCV will clear the virus during the acute phase. The other 50-85% will become a chronic carrier and will carry the virus for life. Some of these chronic carriers will develop cirrhosis or liver cancer.

What are the symptoms?

Most people who develop acute hepatitis C have no symptoms and do not know they are infected. If symptoms develop, they usually appear 6-7 weeks after exposure to the virus. During this period, people can have symptoms such as jaundice (skin and eyes turn yellow), fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, dark urine, joint pain and pain in the stomach area. It is important to note that you can pass the virus on to others even if you have no symptoms.

How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV is mostly spread through contact with infected blood. In Canada, HCV is mainly spread through sharing of needles or drug use equipment.

Hepatitis C is rarely spread through sex, but it may happen if people engage in high risk behavior and where there is a chance of exposure to HCV infected blood.

Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, sharing food or cutlery, or using toilets.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

A blood test is used to identify if you are infected by the HCV. If you think you may be at risk for hepatitis C, you should talk to your healthcare provider and get tested.

How is hepatitis C treated?

Any patient known to have hepatitis C should be referred to a healthcare provider for further assessment and treatment.

To reduce the risk of further damage to the liver, people with hepatitis C should:

- Be immunized against hepatitis A and hepatitis B;
- Minimize alcohol intake;
- Check with a healthcare provider before taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs.

Who is at risk of hepatitis C infections?

The following persons are known to be at increased risk for HCV infection:

- Current or former injection drug users, including those who injected only once many years ago.
- Recipients of blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992, when better testing of donors became available.
- Chronic hemodialysis patients.
- Persons with known exposures to HCV, such as health care workers after needlesticks involving HCV-positive blood.
- Persons engaging in sexual contact with high risk behavior and where there is a chance of exposure to HCV infected blood
- Persons with HIV infection
- Children born to HCV-positive mothers
- Persons having a body piercing, a tattoo or acupuncture using unsterile/shared equipment.

How can hepatitis be prevented?

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV infection. The best way to protect you is to take the following precautions:

- Individuals who are sexually active should:
 - » Limit the number of sexual partners and avoid sex with people whose sexual history is unknown.
 - » Always use condoms when having sex (vaginal, oral, or anal). A dental dam (a sheet of latex) or a male condom cut open should be used for oral sex.
 - » Avoid the use of alcohol and other drugs that might cloud thinking and lead to high-risk behavior.
- Individuals who inject drugs should:
 - » Not share needles or injection drug equipment with others. Cleaning with bleach may not kill the virus.
 - » Use only clean needles and equipment
- Be cautious about body piercings, tattoos and acupuncture. Make sure single-use, disposable needles are used and that all other equipment is disinfected and sterile.
- If you are likely to be in contact with blood or other bodily fluids in your work take appropriate precautions, such as wearing latex gloves.

If you have hepatitis C:

- Do not donate blood, semen, tissue or organs unless recommended otherwise.
- Be very careful to make sure that other people are not exposed to your blood.
- Cover any wounds with a waterproof bandage.

What is the public health response?

If you are diagnosed with hepatitis C, your health-care provider will treat you and give you information on sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections (STBBI).

A Public Health nurse may contact you to support you in contacting your partners. Your partners include any drug use partners. Your long-term partners and children may also need to be tested.

All discussions are strictly confidential.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your health-care provider, Tele-Care 811, local Public Health office or visit the [government of New Brunswick](#) website.

To find hepatitis C services near you, please visit the [HIV411.ca](#) website.