

# HEPATITIS C

## **What is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). It is different from hepatitis A and hepatitis B. Although hepatitis C has been around for many years, scientists only recently found a test for antibodies to the virus.

## **What are the symptoms?**

Most people with hepatitis C experience no symptoms and may feel quite healthy. Other people may experience tiredness, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, fever, headache and abdominal pain. Sometimes people have itchy skin, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), dark urine or light colored stool. It can take 6 weeks to 9 months from when you were infected for symptoms to show up. For many people, symptoms do not show up for 20 years or more.

## **Is there a test for hepatitis C?**

Yes. A blood test for hepatitis C detects the HCV antibody. It's important to keep in mind that even though you have antibodies, it does not mean you have recovered from the disease. It usually takes about 70 days after infection for the blood test to be positive.

## **What if I test positive?**

If a blood test shows that you have HCV, it means that at some time in your life you have been exposed to the virus. To find out if the virus is affecting your health, you need to see your doctor for more tests. Your doctor may recommend blood tests to see if the virus is affecting the way your liver works. You may need a physical exam, an ultrasound x-ray, a referral to a specialist and/or a liver biopsy. If your first tests are normal, your doctor may ask you to come back for a yearly check-up.

## **Do people recover from hepatitis C infection?**

Most people who test positive for HCV will always test positive. That means the infection continues in about 80 percent of cases. A small number of people are able to clear the virus from their blood after they are infected. HCV may lead to liver damage, cirrhosis and, once in a while, liver cancer. It may take up to 20 - 30 years to show up. Many people with HCV will remain healthy and do not experience liver disease.

## **What can I do?**

Once you know you have tested positive, you should see your doctor to learn what to do to stay in good health. If you drink alcohol, do not drink any more than four drinks per week. HCV and alcohol together can cause more damage to your liver.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is hard on the liver. If you use acetaminophen regularly or excessively, talk to your doctor about using another medicine instead. Interferon and Ribovarin are the drugs currently used to treat hepatitis C. Used in special circumstances only, these drugs may help the liver to work better. To protect your liver from another infection, you are advised to have hepatitis A and hepatitis B immunizations. You can get hepatitis A vaccine for a fee by contacting a Public Health Centre or your physician. To receive free hepatitis B vaccine, please call any Public Health Centre for an appointment.

## How is hepatitis C infection spread?

HCV is carried in the blood. It is not known to be carried in semen, vaginal fluid or saliva. The virus may be spread when infected blood comes in contact with other blood by:

- Doing drugs (sharing needles, spoon/water for intravenous drug use).
- Receiving a blood transfusion (in Canada blood donated before 1990 was not screened for HCV).
- Sharing needles (ear or body piercing, tattooing, electrolysis, acupuncture).
- Sharing articles that have a small amount of infected blood (razors, toothbrushes, earrings).

Pregnant women or women giving birth may pass HCV to their babies, but this rarely happens. There is no proven transmission of HCV from a nursing mother to her baby through breastmilk. At this time, there is not enough information to recommend or to advise against breastfeeding. Hepatitis C is not usually spread by sexual contact. It can be spread if there is blood present during sexual contact or by having unprotected sex with a woman with HCV who is menstruating. Also, it can be spread if there is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) present. Long term sexual partners of people with HCV run a slightly higher risk of having HCV and should be tested. Sexual partners in a monogamous long-term relationship may not need to use condoms. We advise sexual partners in short-term relationships or with multiple partners to use condoms.

## Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

- Anyone who has shared needles, spoons, water or equipment for intravenous drug use.
- Those in Canada who received blood transfusions before 1990.
- Hemophiliacs.
- Those who have had renal dialysis.
- Long term sexual partners of persons infected with hepatitis C.
- Babies born to mothers who have tested positive to HCV.

## Some DOs and DON'Ts if you have hepatitis C:

- DO** mix one part bleach with 10 parts water to clean up blood spills. Wash hands well after cleaning up.
- DO** throw away tissues or menstrual pads in a place where no one else will handle them.
- DO** be careful with used needles or razor blades. Throw them away into a hard container such as a bleach bottle or coffee tin. Close the lid, tape it shut and put it in the garbage.
- DO** tell your health care worker (doctor, dentist, nurse) that you have had hepatitis C.
- DO** make sure you use a condom or avoid sexual contact if your partner is menstruating.
- DO NOT** share intravenous drug needles or equipment.
- DO NOT** donate blood, organs or semen.
- DO NOT** share needles of any kind (body piercing, tattoo, electrolysis and acupuncture).
- DO NOT** share toothbrushes, earrings or razors. Even tiny amounts of blood on these articles can contain the virus and spread the disease to others who share them.

For health advice and information 24 hours a day, seven days a week, call **Health Link Alberta** at 780-408-LINK (5465) or outside the local calling area, call toll-free 1-866-408-LINK.

Visit [www.albertahealthservices.ca](http://www.albertahealthservices.ca) for health information online.