

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver which can cause permanent damage or lead to liver cancer. About 75-85% of those infected with the Hepatitis C virus (HCV) will carry the virus for life and can infect others.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may appear 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure to the virus, but 90% of people have no signs of illness at time of exposure. Symptoms include, chronic fatigue, lack of appetite, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, itchiness, jaundice (yellow eyes and skin), and joint and muscle aches. Most people who carry the virus remain symptom free for many years; however, some do become ill because of ongoing damage to their liver causing cirrhosis (scarring) or cancer of the liver.

## How is HCV spread?

- Through contact with blood or body fluids containing blood of an infected person. The infected fluids must enter a break in the skin.
- By sharing drug related equipment such as needles, spoons, straws, and filters.
- By using non-sterile equipment for tattooing, body piercing, acupuncture and aesthetic procedures.
- Receiving blood transfusions or blood products that have not been screened for hepatitis C. Since 1992, blood donations in Canada are screened for the hepatitis C virus.
- Sexual transmission is very low. The risk may increase when there are open genital sores and during menstrual periods.
- 1- 5% of women who have HCV pass it on to their babies before or at the time of birth. This increases to 10-15% if the mother also has HIV.
- Breastfeeding does not pass HCV from mother to baby. If the nipples are bleeding or cracked it is recommended that breast feeding be stopped until healed.

Hepatitis C is not spread by water, food, kissing, sneezing or coughing.

## How is hepatitis C detected?

Two blood tests are needed to diagnose Hepatitis C. If your first blood test is positive for hepatitis C antibodies you will require a second blood test called Hepatitis C Ribonucleic Acid (HCV RNA). This test will determine if the virus is still present in your blood. It is important to complete the second blood test if the first is positive.

# HEPATITIS C

## Is there treatment?

Yes, there is treatment. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist to determine whether or not you require treatment.

## What should I do to protect myself and others?

- Ensure sterile/new equipment is used for drug use, tattooing, body/ear piercing, acupuncture, or aesthetic procedures.
- During sexual activities where blood may be present use a condom or dental dam.
- Do not share personal care items that could come in contact with blood (razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, nail files).
- Cover cuts or sores on your skin with bandages.
- Dispose of blood stained articles (tampons, dental floss, bandages) in a tied plastic bag.
- Use Routine Practices when exposed to blood in a first aid situation (wear gloves, clean and disinfect bloodstained surfaces, dispose of blood stained articles in a plastic bag, wash hands after removing gloves).

Even if you have been infected once with hepatitis C, you can become infected again. There is no vaccine available to protect you from hepatitis C.

## Publicly funded hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccine is available and recommended for individuals who are hepatitis C positive.

### Further information can be obtained from:

Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700  
[www.peelregion.ca](http://www.peelregion.ca)

Canadian Liver Foundation  
(416) 491-3353 or 1-(800) 563-5483  
[www.liver.ca](http://www.liver.ca)

CATIE Hepatitis C  
1-800-263-1638  
[www.hepcinfo.ca](http://www.hepcinfo.ca)