

# Hepatitis C

## What is hepatitis C infection?

The word 'hepatitis' means inflammation of the liver. The hepatitis C virus is spread by blood to blood contact. About one in four people who become infected with hepatitis C will get rid of the virus without treatment (usually in the first six months). However in many people hepatitis C infection causes liver damage that gets worse over time, which may lead to cirrhosis (liver scarring) or hepatocellular carcinoma (liver cancer). With treatment, hepatitis C infection can be cured for many people.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C infection?

Early (acute) hepatitis C infection may not be noticeable for up to eight out of ten infected people. For those who experience symptoms, these may include:

- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Loss of appetite
- Joint pain
- Nausea
- Abdominal (stomach/tummy) pain

These symptoms often disappear over a few weeks, although the infection may remain. If the infection lasts for more than six months, it is known as chronic (long-term) infection. Chronic infection may be silent for many years until severe liver damage develops.

## How is hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus, which means it is spread through contact with an infected person's blood. In New Zealand, hepatitis C is most commonly spread between people who inject drugs, through shared needles and preparation equipment. Before screening of donated blood started in New Zealand in 1992, infections were also spread through transfusions. This may still happen in some countries. There is a low risk of spread through sexual intercourse where blood-to-blood contact does not occur. The infection may also be passed from mother to baby, particularly at birth. Hepatitis C can also be spread through tattoos or piercings where equipment is not sterile, needle-stick injuries or shared personal items that may have blood on them (such as razors or toothbrushes).

Hepatitis C is not spread through touching, sharing food, coughing or sneezing.

## How would I know if I had hepatitis C infection?

As most people do not get symptoms, the only way to check if a person has hepatitis C infection is with a blood test, which your doctor will interpret. If hepatitis C infection is present you will usually

have another blood test to check the genotype (strain) of the hepatitis C virus. This helps to decide the best treatment to use

## Can hepatitis C be treated?

Hepatitis C infection can be cured for many people. The type of medicine used depends on the genotype (strain) of infection and how severe the liver damage is. Some people can now be treated by their GP. Treating the infection reduces the risk of further liver damage. New directly acting antiviral medicines have been funded in New Zealand for the treatment of some types of hepatitis C infection since 2016. If you have hepatitis C infection, it is important to make an appointment with your GP as soon as possible to discuss treatment.

## How can I prevent passing the infection on to others?

- Cover any open cuts or sores
- Clean any blood spillage with household bleach (do not put bleach on your skin). Dilute to make a 0.1% solution (e.g. if the product is 2% hypochlorite, the active ingredient, mix 50mls of the bleach with 950mls of water). The bleach mixture should be left on the surface for half an hour before wiping clean.
- Do not share piercing, tattooing, drug injecting or snorting equipment
- Avoid sexual practices which may risk blood contact. Use condoms.
- Do not donate blood.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or any item that may be in contact with blood.

## How can I avoid getting hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C, and it is possible to become infected again even if you have had successful treatment for hepatitis C infection in the past. Never share any drug injecting equipment (e.g. needles, cookers or filters). Only get tattoos or piercings where you are sure that sterile equipment and fresh needles are used. Use safe sex practices. Don't share personal care items that may be contaminated with blood. Always use gloves when handling blood or body fluids, and cover cuts and wounds.

## Confidentiality

You do not have to tell anyone that you have hepatitis C infection. However, you do need to take precautions to prevent infecting others. Telling those who are directly affected, such as sexual partners, gives them an opportunity to be tested and get treatment if they are also infected. It is best to tell your health professionals, as this will help them to provide the best care for you. You do not need to tell your employer, although it is advisable to inform them if you are a healthcare worker.

## Looking after your liver

Hepatitis C infection causes damage to the liver over time. If you are infected with hepatitis C, it is particularly important to avoid things that may further damage the liver. Avoid drinking alcohol or using cannabis, as these can both contribute to cirrhosis (liver scarring). Check with your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medicines or herbal or traditional medicines, as some should be avoided if you have liver disease.

Hepatitis A and B are two other viruses that also affect the liver – getting vaccinated against these viruses protects you from getting them in the future. Speak to your doctor about getting immunised – if you are not immune to the hepatitis B virus the vaccine is free (your practice nurse or GP may charge a fee to give the vaccine). The hepatitis A vaccine is not free, but is also recommended. Try to get plenty of rest, exercise and maintain a healthy diet.

## Where to go for more information

- Your GP
- The Hepatitis Foundation ([www.hepatitisfoundation.org.nz/hepatitis-c](http://www.hepatitisfoundation.org.nz/hepatitis-c)) or 0800 33 10 20

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