

HEPATITIS C

What is hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis means inflammation (pain and swelling) of the liver.
- Hepatitis can be caused by chemicals, drugs, drinking too much alcohol or viruses.
- Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus; there are many different strains of this virus.
- About one quarter of people who are infected will clear the virus from their body in six months.
- The rest will carry the virus for life and some of these people get liver damage or liver cancer many years later.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Symptoms often don't appear until years after infection with the hepatitis C virus. Symptoms include:

- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Soreness under the ribs on the right side
- Fever
- Joint pain
- Mood changes and depression.

How is hepatitis C spread?

The hepatitis C virus is in the blood of an infected person. The virus can be spread by:

- Unclean equipment used for injections, operations, removal of teeth, or tattooing
- Infected blood transfusions. Blood used for transfusions in Australia is tested for hepatitis C
- Using personal items like razors and toothbrushes (which may have blood on them) belonging to someone with hepatitis C
- Sometimes the virus may spread to the baby of a woman with hepatitis C during pregnancy or birth. The risk is higher if the mother has been recently infected. Hepatitis C does not seem to be spread through breast milk, unless there is blood in the milk
- Hepatitis C is rarely spread through sexual activity, but is more likely if there is contact with blood.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

- A blood test can tell if you have been infected with hepatitis C virus. It may take up to 6 months after infection before the blood test can detect hepatitis C.
- A blood test can also tell whether you have cleared the virus from your body.
- Hepatitis C antibodies (from proteins that fight infection) will still be in your blood even if you have cleared the virus.
- If you have hepatitis C antibodies, and your body has not cleared the virus, your doctor may refer you to a specialist doctor or clinic.

How is hepatitis C treated?

- Treatment aims to clear hepatitis C from your body. The treatment lasts for 6 to 12 months, and is usually arranged by special liver clinics.

If you have hepatitis C you will feel better if you:

- Avoid drinking alcohol
- Eat a well-balanced, low fat diet
- Do regular exercise
- Rest when you are tired.

It is important to have regular checkups with your family doctor.

Do I have to tell anyone if I have hepatitis C?

You do not have to tell anyone if you have hepatitis C, except if you are donating blood or applying for life insurance.

Further information is available from