

Hepatitis C is caused by a virus that is spread through contact with infected blood. Prevention through the use of sterile needles and injecting equipment is key, and people with hepatitis C should ensure others are not exposed to their blood.

Hepatitis C

Last updated: 07 December 2007

What is Hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis C is an infectious disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). There are several different genotypes (or strains) of the hepatitis C virus
- Infection causes inflammation of the liver (known as "hepatitis")
- About one quarter of people who are infected will clear the virus within a few months
- The other three quarters develop an ongoing (chronic) infection and many will carry the virus for life. Some of these people eventually develop cirrhosis or cancer of the liver many years after infection.

What are the symptoms?

- About 10% to 20% of people who are infected with the hepatitis C virus develop symptoms from 2 weeks to 6 months (usually 6 to 9 weeks) after infection. These symptoms include tiredness, loss of appetite, stomach discomfort, nausea, vomiting, jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin) and dark urine.

How is it spread?

- A person with hepatitis C is infectious unless they clear the infection
- Hepatitis C is spread through contact with an infected

person's blood, by:

- using contaminated needles or sharing injecting equipment when injecting drugs, tattooing or skin piercing
- transfusions (this may have occurred in Australia prior to 1990)
- needle stick injuries
- medical procedures involving contaminated instruments
- sharing personal items that could have blood on them (e.g., razors, toothbrushes, nail scissors)
- Hepatitis C is rarely spread through sex, but is more likely when there is contact with blood
- Hepatitis C may sometimes spread to the baby of a woman with hepatitis C during pregnancy or birth. The risk is higher if the mother has recently been infected, or has HIV infection
- Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, sharing food or cutlery, or using toilets. It does not seem to be passed on via breast milk, unless it is contaminated with blood.
- Reinfection with different genotypes can occur

Who is at risk?

- Injecting drug users
- Babies born to women with hepatitis C
- Haemodialysis patients
- Health care workers
- People born in countries with high rates of hepatitis C infection (such as in parts of Africa and Egypt)
- People who have home tattoos or body piercing with non-sterile equipment
- Prison inmates.

How is it prevented?

To avoid infection:

- Do not share injecting equipment
- Do not share personal items that could have blood on them
- If having a tattoo or your body pierced, make sure only sterile equipment is used
- Practice safe sex.

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV infection. Immunoglobulin is not effective. Since 1990, Australian blood banks have screened donated blood for hepatitis C.

If you have hepatitis C:

- Do not donate blood. (Organs from a person with hepatitis C infection can sometimes be donated to another person who is already infected with hepatitis C)
- Do not share injecting equipment with others
- Be very careful to make sure that other people are not exposed to your blood
- Clean up any blood spills with a paper towel and clean thoroughly with detergent and water until no obvious stains are left. Large spills on carpet may need to be shampooed or steam cleaned
- Cover any wounds with a waterproof bandage
- Use condoms where there may be exposure to blood during sex.

How is it diagnosed?

Blood tests include:

- Antibodies to hepatitis C virus (shows that the person has been exposed to the virus at some time, but does not show if the virus is still present in the blood - babies born to women who have had hepatitis C can have their mother's antibodies for the first year or so of life, but this does not mean the baby is infected).
- A nucleic acid test, such as PCR (shows that the virus is in the blood)
- A viral load test (shows how much virus is in the blood)
- A genotype test (shows what strain of virus is in the blood - which can help in planning treatment)
- Liver function tests, which may show current liver damage

A liver biopsy (where a small piece of liver is taken and examined under the microscope) shows the type and extent of any liver damage and may help in planning treatment.

How is it treated?

- There has been a significant improvement in the treatment of hepatitis C in recent years
- The drugs Interferon and Ribavirin can successfully treat hepatitis C in some people
- The success of treatment depends on the genotype and the amount of virus in the blood
- Treatment can clear the virus in up to 80% of people with genotypes 2 and 3 and up to 50% of people with genotype 1

- These drugs are usually taken for 6 to 12 months and can sometimes have serious side effects.

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

- Have hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccinations
- Minimise alcohol intake
- Check with a doctor before taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs.

What is the public health response?

Hepatitis C is notifiable by both doctors and laboratories. Public health unit staff investigate cases of newly acquired infections to identify risk factors. Monitoring risk factors helps develop improved prevention programs.

For Information on Hepatitis C

- **NSW Hep C Helpline on 9332 1599 or 1800 803 990**
- **ADIS (Alcohol & Drug Information Service) 9361 2111 or 1800 422 599**
- **NUAA (NSW Users & AIDS Association) 9369 3455 or 1800 644 413**

Further information - Public Health Units in NSW

For more information please contact your doctor, local public health unit or community health centre - look under NSW Government at the front of the White Pages

Metropolitan Areas	Location	Number	Rural Areas	Location	Number
Northern Sydney/Central Coast	Hornsby	02 9477 9400	Greater Southern	Goulburn	02 4824 1837
	Gosford	02 4349 4845		Albury	02 6080 8900
South Eastern Sydney/Illawarra	Randwick	02 9382 8333	Greater Western	Broken Hill	08 8080 1499
	Wollongong	02 4221 6700		Dubbo	02 6841 5569
Sydney South West	Camperdown	02 9515 9420		Bathurst	02 6339 5601
Sydney West	Penrith	02 4734 2022	Hunter/New England	Newcastle	02 4924 6477
	Parramatta	02 9840 3603		Tamworth	02 6767 8630
Justice Health Service	Matraville	02 9311 2707	North Coast	Port Macquarie	02 6588 2750
				Lismore	02 6620 7500

See full details of Public Health Units at www.health.nsw.gov.au/publichealth/infectious/phus.asp