

Hepatitis C

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

What is Hepatitis C infection and what are the symptoms?

Hepatitis C is a disease of the liver caused by Hepatitis C virus (HCV).

Most people feel well, have no symptoms and don't know they have Hepatitis C. Some people may have a brief illness with symptoms appearing six to twelve weeks after being infected with the virus. Others may experience long-term health concerns such as tiredness, lack of energy, or digestive problems.

Symptoms of acute Hepatitis C infection may include fever, tiredness, jaundice (yellow skin or eyes), abdominal pain, dark urine, loss of appetite, and nausea (sick to your stomach). Again, most individual will have no symptoms.

How is the Hepatitis C virus spread?

Hepatitis C virus infection is spread by blood-to-blood contact.

Infection can occur through:

- Illicit drug use including sharing drug snorting, smoking or injection equipment such as needles, syringes, spoons, straws and pipes;
- Exposure to blood and blood products including receiving a transfusion of blood or a blood product in a country where the blood supply is not tested for Hepatitis C. In Canada, this applies to blood and blood products received before 1992;
- An accidental needle poke with a recently used, contaminated needle;
- An infected mother passing it to her newborn infant, at the time of delivery (very low risk, likely less than 5 - 6%);
- Sexual intercourse, extremely low risk, except for those who have multiple sexual partners, or when blood contact occurs;
- Sharing toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, nail files, or other items which could have blood on them;
- Skin-piercing events such as tattoos, body piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis, if the equipment is not clean.

How can you tell if you have Hepatitis C?

After the Hepatitis C virus infects your body, antibodies appear in your blood. There are blood tests available to detect these antibodies and presence of the virus itself.

While a few people (approx. 20%) will recover from the infection and clear the virus from their body, most people will be chronically infected. This means that the person is capable of spreading the infection to others and at risk of developing liver disease.

How do you get treatment?

People who have Hepatitis C should see their family doctor regularly to see how their liver is functioning. They may also be referred to a Hepatitis C specialist for further testing and assessment.

Some people with Hepatitis C will require treatment.

At this time, there is no vaccine to prevent infection with Hepatitis C.

What should you do if you prick yourself with a dirty needle?

- If possible, put the wounded area lower than the heart, to promote bleeding.
- Wash the area well with soap and water
- Go to the nearest hospital Emergency Department immediately for care.

How can I know for sure if I have Hepatitis C?

The only way to find out for sure is by having a blood test.

In the Yukon, you can get tested at any Community Health Centers, Yukon Communicable Disease Control in Whitehorse, or discuss with your physician.

Contact Information

For more information contact Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323. #4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon

In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.

Adapted from BC HealthFiles