



1. Hepatitis C – what you need to know

- 1.1 What is hepatitis C?
- 1.2 Is hepatitis C the same as hepatitis A and B?
- 1.3 How do you get hepatitis C?
- 1.4 What does hepatitis C do?
- 1.5 Testing for hepatitis C
- 1.6 Hepatitis C and personal health
- 1.7 Treatment for hepatitis C
- 1.8 Preventing hepatitis C in the community
- 1.9 Support and understanding
- 1.10 For more information

1.1 What is hepatitis C?

The word 'hepatitis' means inflammation of the liver. This inflammation can be caused by chemicals, drugs, drinking too much alcohol, or viruses. Hepatitis C (HCV), or "hep C", is caused by the hepatitis C virus.

1.2 Is hepatitis C the same as hepatitis A and B?

Hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C are all different viruses which can cause liver inflammation. Each virus is transmitted in different ways. You can be vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B, but there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. It is possible to have different hepatitis viruses at the same time.

About 1 in every 100 people in Australia and around the world has hepatitis C, and many people don't know that they have it. People can have hepatitis C and not know because it can take many years for symptoms to appear.

1.3 How do you get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is transmitted when blood from one person with hepatitis C enters the blood stream of another person. This is called blood-to-blood contact. Even amounts of blood too small to see can transmit the virus. There are lots of myths about how hepatitis C is transmitted, so it is important to remember that:

You **can** get hepatitis C by:

High Risk

- Unsterile medical or dental procedures and traditional medical practices where the skin is pierced. In many countries this is the most common way that hepatitis C is transmitted. The blood supply, vaccinations and medical procedures in Australia are safe.
- Re-using someone else's injecting equipment for drugs, including steroids – this is the way hepatitis C is most commonly transmitted in Australia.
- Unsterile tattooing or body piercing.

Low Risk

- Needle-stick injuries to health workers.
- Mother- to- child transmission may happen during pregnancy or childbirth if mother has hepatitis C.
- Blood product transfusion in Australia before 1990.

- Re-using someone else's personal items that may have blood on them, such as razors and toothbrushes.
- Blood-to-blood contact during sex.
- Needle-stick injuries from discarded drug injecting needles in public places.

Hepatitis C exists in every country of the world. Risks are present in Australia, in your country of birth and in all other countries.

You **cannot** get hepatitis C from:

- Sharing toilets
- Eating utensils or drinking glasses
- Coughing, sneezing, kissing or hugging
- Swimming pools
- Mosquitoes or other insect bites

1.4 What does hepatitis C do?

- Of 100 people with hepatitis C
 - One in four will get rid of the virus naturally within the first 12 months.
 - The remaining 75% will continue to have the virus in their body but may experience no obvious symptoms.
 - Without medical treatment, about 30 of them will develop symptoms, which will become noticeable between 10 to 15 years after becoming infected.
 - After 20 years, about 10 will have developed serious liver disease without treatment. Five of these will have developed liver failure or liver cancer.

Many people do not get symptoms of hepatitis C. If someone does get symptoms, the most common ones are: tiredness (fatigue), nausea and abdominal pains.

1.5 Testing for hepatitis C

You should think about having a hepatitis C test if:

- You have ever had a blood product transfusion, vaccination or other medical procedure in another country, and you are not sure if it was sterile.
- You have ever had a traditional medical, tattooing or piercing practice and you are not sure if it was sterile.
- You have ever injected drugs, or have ever shared injecting equipment, or have ever assisted someone to inject drugs (including steroids).
- You have ever been in prison and injected drugs, including steroids, or shared injecting equipment, or had a tattoo or a piercing; shared a razor or toothbrush.
- You are not sure if your tattoo or body piercing was done with sterile equipment.
- You had a blood product transfusion in Australia before February 1990.

The only way to find out if you have hepatitis C is to have a blood test. You can ask your doctor to do this test for you.

You can request an interpreter, who will respect your right to privacy.

Some sexual health clinics offer free and confidential hepatitis C testing. You do not need to have a Medicare card to go to a sexual health clinic.

1.6 Hepatitis C and personal health

If you have hepatitis C it is important to see a doctor for regular check-ups and to try and stay as healthy as possible.

Your state or territory Hepatitis organisation can provide you with more support and information about living with hepatitis C.

1.7 Treatment for hepatitis C

New treatments are available to treat hepatitis C. They are effective, easy to take and have few side effects.

Not only do the new treatments have a 90-95% chance of curing hepatitis C, the length of the treatment is also much shorter than before.

They can be prescribed by general practitioners (GPs) as well as specialists, which makes it easier for people to be treated.

The new treatments are called direct-acting antivirals or DAAs and are taken as tablets. In some cases, other drugs called Ribavirin and Pegylated Interferon may be included in the treatment. Pegylated Interferon is given as injections.

Treatment takes between 8 - 24 weeks and is recommended for all people living with hepatitis C.

1.8 Preventing hepatitis C in the community

Around the world, transmission of the hepatitis C virus is prevented by:

- Screening blood donations.
- Providing sterile injecting equipment and education to people who inject drugs (harm reduction).
- Sterile medical and traditional medical practices.
- Sterile tattooing and body piercing practices.

Needle and Syringe Programs (NSP) help to reduce harm from injecting drug use in Australia and around the world.

Evidence shows that NSPs in Australia have been successful in preventing hepatitis C transmissions. This has reduced the personal, family and community impact caused by this disease, and has saved the community billions of dollars.*

1.9 Support and understanding

Hepatitis C can carry with it stigma and misunderstanding. This can make people feel ashamed and isolated. Support and understanding can make having hepatitis C easier for our families, friends and community.

One of the biggest issues for people with hepatitis C is who to tell (disclosure). If someone tells you that they have hepatitis C, you should not tell anyone else unless they give you permission. Breaking a person's trust can cause them great personal stress.

In Australia it is unlawful to discriminate against someone because they have hepatitis C. This includes employment. If you have hepatitis C, you do not have to tell anyone, except if you are applying for life insurance or if you donate blood. Health service workers cannot pass on your personal details without your permission.

Your state or territory Hepatitis organisation can provide you with confidential information and support about disclosure, discrimination and employment.

1.10 For more information

If you want to speak to any of these services in a community language you can call the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450 (for the cost of a local call). Ask for an interpreter and when the interpreter comes on the line, ask to call the phone number you want. You will then be able to speak to the service you need via the interpreter.

**Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing: Return on Investment in Needle & Syringe Programs in Australia. Canberra 2002*