

# HEPATITIS C

## Fact Sheet

### **What is hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is an infection caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV). It may result in irritation or swelling of the liver.

### **What are the symptoms?**

Symptoms start slowly at first and may not be noticed. Many people who are infected don't know they are and can spread the infection to others. Symptoms can range from none to severe. Some people with hepatitis C lose their appetite, are fatigued, and have abdominal discomfort, nausea and vomiting. Sometimes the skin and whites of the eyes turn yellow (jaundice).

### **How is hepatitis C spread?**

It is spread by direct blood to blood contact. Often people don't know how they got infected.

### **Who is at risk?**

#### High Risk:

- people who received blood transfusions before 1990 when HCV screening began
- people who received multiple blood products before 1990 (e.g. hemophiliacs, thalassemia patients, dialysis patients)
- injection drug users who EVEN ONCE shared needles or works (syringes, plungers, spoons or cookers, filters, cotton and water for mixing). Rates of infection in those who have ever used injection drugs are at least 30%.
- people who share straws when snorting cocaine

#### Lower Risk:

- people who have had a needle stick injury (4% risk)
- people who have had tattooing, body piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis with equipment that was not cleaned properly
- people who share razors, tooth brushes, or nail files with someone with hepatitis
- people who have had unprotected sex. The risk is estimated to be about 2.5% for prolonged sexual exposure (over 20 years) with an infected person(s).
- risk between family members and from mother to child is very low (less than 5%). If the mother has HIV the risk of hepatitis C increases.

#### Unknown Risk:

- hepatitis C virus has been found in semen, saliva and breast milk by some researchers but not by others.

### **What is the incubation period?**

This ranges from 2 weeks to 6 months. The incubation period is most commonly 6-9 weeks. People are infectious for a week or more before symptoms occur, during the acute disease, and indefinitely in chronic carriers.

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### **How is hepatitis C diagnosed?**

A blood test can detect hepatitis C antibodies (the body's response to infection). If you have antibodies for hepatitis C you are considered to be infected with the hepatitis C virus. It takes 2-8 weeks after infection for the antibodies to appear. If you have a test done during the 2-8 week window period of the infection, you may have a negative test result and still be infectious. Several blood tests may be needed.

### **How is hepatitis C treated?**

For many people, no specific treatment is needed. Some people who have acute hepatitis C may benefit from a drug called Interferon. People with liver failure may need a liver transplant.

### **What are the complications of hepatitis C?**

60 - 80% of people who get the infection never get rid of the virus, even though they may feel well. Long term effects can result in cirrhosis or scarring of the liver (20% of cases). This may take 20-30 years to develop. Cancer of the liver may develop in 30-50 years. Those who have cirrhosis have the highest risk of developing cancer of the liver.

### **What should you do if you are a hepatitis C carrier?**

#### Protect Others:

- Don't share needles.
- Be honest with your sex partner. If you have more than one sexual partner, practice safer sex by always using latex condoms.
- Don't donate blood, organs or semen.
- Don't share razors, toothbrushes, nail files.
- Put articles soiled with blood in a plastic bag, tie bag shut and put in the garbage.

#### To Clean Blood Spills:

- Put on gloves.
- Wipe up the blood or body fluid with a paper towel.
- Wash the area with soap and water.
- Wipe the area with a freshly made solution of 1 part chlorine bleach to 9 parts water.
- Allow the area to dry for 10 minutes.
- Rinse the area with water.
- Place soiled gloves, paper towels, etc. in a plastic bag. Place the bag in a second plastic bag, tie bag shut, and then place it in the garbage.
- Wash your hands.

### **Lower Your Chances of Further Liver Damage**

- If you drink alcohol, STOP. If you can't, limit alcohol intake to no more than 1 drink per day maximum.
- Talk to your doctor about the drugs (prescription, street or over the counter) that you are taking.
- Vaccination against hepatitis types A and B is available, free of charge, to protect your liver from further infection.

### **Other Questions?**

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 x349. Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | [www.hpepublichealth.ca](http://www.hpepublichealth.ca)

### **Reference**

- Heymann, D. L., (2008). *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*. (19th Ed.). Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.

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