

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

The hepatitis C virus (HCV) is one of several viruses that can cause hepatitis, a disease that attacks your liver. Of those infected with hepatitis C, only about 20 percent will clear the virus from their body. Most people infected with hepatitis C become chronic carriers. Chronic carriers have the virus in their blood for the rest of their life and can spread it to others.

How can I get hepatitis C?

You can get hepatitis C from any exposure to blood from a person infected with the virus. The virus enters the body through a break in the skin or through mucous membranes such as the mouth or nose.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Symptoms can start to appear anytime from two weeks up to six months after exposure. Usually, symptoms begin to appear six to nine weeks after exposure. Often people have no symptoms.

Symptoms can include:

- fatigue
- jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin)
- dark urine
- lack of appetite
- itchy skin
- nausea, vomiting
- abdominal pain
- joint and muscle aches

Most carriers are symptom free for years. However, some people will get sick because of ongoing damage to their liver. Chronic hepatitis C can lead to liver cirrhosis (scarring of liver) and cancer.

Who is at risk of getting hepatitis C?

Activities that put you at risk are:

- Sharing needles or drug using equipment
- Piercing, tattooing, or acupuncture with unsterilized equipment
- Receiving blood transfusions or blood product before 1992
- Hemodialysis
- Sexual activity with an infected partner when there is blood to blood contact
- Being born to an infected mother (about 5 percent risk)

- Sharing personal care items (e.g., razors, toothbrush)
- Needle-stick injuries

What can happen if I get hepatitis C?

Most people who get hepatitis C have mild disease. After 20 years, approximately 20 percent of people will develop liver cirrhosis (scarring of liver).

What should I do if I have symptoms of hepatitis C?

Consult with your Health Care Provider (HCP) if you suspect that you may have hepatitis C. They can order blood tests to see if you have the virus in your blood. You should discuss testing with your HCP if you have any risk factors or think you may have been exposed.

Can hepatitis C be treated?

Yes. Please discuss possible treatment options with your HCP. Treatment costs may not be covered by OHIP.

What can I do to prevent hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. To protect yourself you need to avoid behaviours that put you at risk of coming in contact with the blood of someone infected with hepatitis C.

- Do not share needles or any drug-using equipment (including straws for snorting). If you use injection drugs, check with your local health department for a needle exchange program. For Halton Region call 905-330-3305, or for North Halton call 905-702-4200.
- If you are getting a piercing, tattooing, or having acupuncture, ensure that the service is regulated or inspected, uses single-use needles, and that other equipment is sterilized
- Wear protective gloves if you are likely to come in contact with blood
- Practice safer sex by using a condom every time
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or other personal care items such as nail clippers

What do I do if I have hepatitis C?

- Discuss the possibility of treatment with your HCP
- Talk with your doctor about hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine for free
- Avoid alcohol
- Live and maintain a healthy lifestyle
- It is safe to touch, hug, and kiss your family and friends!
- Clean up any blood spills at home right away
- Keep cuts and scrapes covered with bandages or gauze
- Avoid activities that put others at risk of coming in contact with your blood, such as needle sharing
- Inform HCPs who may come in contact with your blood (e.g., dentist) about your hepatitis C status
- Do not donate blood, tissue, organs, or semen
- Beware of over-the-counter medications and herbal remedies. Consult with your HCP to discuss if these are safe for your liver.
- During birth, there is a small chance hepatitis C can be transmitted to the infant. Have the infant checked for Hepatitis C antibodies at 18 months of age
- If breastfeeding, stop temporarily if the nipples/areola are bleeding or cracked

Contact the Canadian Liver Foundation for support and information at liver.ca or toll free 1-800-563-5483.

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