

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a virus that can cause severe damage to your liver. It is spread through contact with another person's blood. About one in four people who become infected with hepatitis C will get rid of the virus without the need for any treatment (usually in the first six months). However, in many people hepatitis C infection causes liver damage that gets worse over time. It can lead to liver scarring (cirrhosis) or liver cancer (hepatocellular carcinoma). With treatment, hepatitis C infection can be cured for many people.

How it spreads

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus, which means it is spread through contact with an infected person's blood. In New Zealand, hepatitis C is most commonly spread between people who inject drugs, through shared needles and preparation equipment.

People who have had blood transfusions overseas may also have been at risk of hepatitis C infection, if the blood wasn't screened properly. Since 1992 there has been no risk of this in New Zealand, as all blood donations are screened.

There is a low risk of spread through sexual intercourse (where no blood-to-blood contact occurs). Hepatitis C can also be spread through:

- tattoos or piercings where equipment is not sterile
- needle-stick injuries
- shared personal items that may have blood on them (e.g. razors / toothbrushes)
- from mother to baby, particularly at birth

Hepatitis C is not spread through touching, sharing food, coughing or sneezing.

Symptoms

Most people do not have any symptoms until the liver has been significantly damaged. For those who do experience symptoms earlier on, these may include:

- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Loss of appetite
- Joint pain
- Nausea
- Abdominal (stomach/tummy) pain

These symptoms often disappear over a few weeks, although the infection may remain. If the infection lasts for more than six months, it is known as chronic (long-term) infection. Chronic infection may go unnoticed for many years until severe liver damage develops.

How to check if you have hepatitis C

The only way to check if a person has hepatitis C infection is with a blood test. If hepatitis C infection is detected you will usually have a second blood test to check the strain of the hepatitis C virus. This helps to decide the best treatment to use.

Treatment

Hepatitis C infection can be cured for many people. The type of medicine used depends on the strain of infection and how severe the liver damage is. If you have hepatitis C infection it is important to contact your GP as soon as possible. Treatment reduces the risk of further liver damage.

How to prevent passing on the virus to others

To avoid passing on hepatitis C to others:

- Cover any open cuts or sores.
- Clean any blood spillage with a household 0.1% bleach solution (do not put bleach on your skin). The bleach mixture should be left on the surface for 30 minutes before wiping clean.
- Do not share piercing, tattooing, drug injecting or snorting equipment.
- Avoid sexual practices which may risk blood contact and use condoms.
- Do not donate blood.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or any item that may be in contact with blood.

Protecting yourself against hepatitis C

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C, and it is possible to become infected again even if you have been successfully treated in the past. To avoid hepatitis C infection:

- Never share any drug injecting equipment (e.g. needles, cookers or filters).
- Only get tattoos or piercings where you are sure that sterile equipment and fresh needles are used.
- Use safe sex practices.
- Don't share personal care items that may be contaminated with blood.
- Always use gloves when handling blood or body fluids, and cover cuts and wounds.

Confidentiality & telling others

You do not have to tell anyone that you have hepatitis C infection. However, you do need to take precautions to prevent infecting others. Telling those who are directly affected, such as sexual partners, gives them an opportunity to be tested and get treated (if they are also infected).

It is best to tell health professionals, as this will help them to provide the best care for you. You do not need to tell your employer, although it is recommended you inform them if you are a healthcare worker.

Looking after your liver

Hepatitis C infection causes damage to the liver over time. If you are infected with hepatitis C, it is particularly important to avoid things that may further damage the liver. It's recommended you:

- Avoid drinking alcohol or using cannabis, as these can both contribute to cirrhosis (liver scarring).
- Check with your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medicines or herbal or traditional medicines, as some should be avoided if you have liver disease.

Hepatitis A and B are two other viruses that also affect the liver. Getting vaccinated against these viruses protects you from getting them in the future. Speak to your doctor about getting immunised. If you are not immune to the hepatitis B virus the vaccine is free (your practice nurse or GP may charge a fee to give the vaccine). The hepatitis A vaccine is not free, but is recommended.

You should also try to get plenty of rest, exercise and maintain a healthy diet.

For more information

For more information visit:

- www.arphs.nz/hepatitis-C
- www.hepatitisfoundation.org.nz/hepatitis-c

You can also call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor or practice nurse.