

# facts about

YBOK — You're Better Off Knowing

# hepatitis C a liver disease

CANADIAN LIVER FOUNDATION  
FONDATION CANADIENNE DU FOIE

365 Bloor Street East, Suite 200  
Toronto, Ontario M4W 3L4

Tel: (416) 964-1953  
Fax: (416) 964-0024

Toll free: 1-800-563-5483  
www.liver.ca  
E-mail: clf@liver.ca

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by a virus. This virus was first found in 1989. It is called the Hepatitis C Virus, or HCV, for short.

HCV is spread when people share blood or body fluids containing blood.

Hepatitis C is different from Hepatitis A or Hepatitis B.

## Who is most likely to get Hepatitis C?

Since HCV is usually spread through direct blood-to-blood contact, people that are most likely to get it are as follows:

- Drug users who share needles, spoons, straws and other drug-related equipment.
- People who share a razor or toothbrush with someone who has Hepatitis C.
- People who get tattoos or body parts pierced with dirty or unsterile needles.
- People who received blood transfusions or blood products before 1992.



## Is it easy to get Hepatitis C?

If you live or work with someone who has Hepatitis C, you will NOT get the disease from day-to-day contact.

To get Hepatitis C, you must share blood or body fluids containing blood with a person who has the disease.

## Can I get Hepatitis C from having sex?

Your chance of getting Hepatitis C from having sex is very low. This is true for both straights (heterosexuals) and gays (homosexuals).

People with multiple sexual partners should always practise safer sex, not only to protect themselves against HCV but to prevent getting other infections.



In general, longstanding sexual partners need to be informed that although the risk of HCV transmission is low it is not absent. Long-term monogamous couples should decide for themselves about routine condom use. However, sexual partners should know that the risk of transmission during sexual activity may increase when there are open sores and during menstrual periods.

## Can babies get Hepatitis C from their mothers?

Yes, they can. Some studies show that between 5 and 10 women out of 100 who have HCV might pass it to their babies before OR at the time of birth.

Studies show that breastfeeding does NOT pass HCV from mother to baby. However, if the nipples are bleeding or cracked, it is recommended that breastfeeding be suspended until they are healed.

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## What are the signs of Hepatitis C?

Many people infected with HCV show no symptoms and feel healthy for years.

Other people feel tired, suffer from joint pain or don't feel like eating (no appetite). Some have a yellow look to their eyes and skin. This yellow look is called jaundice.

## 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. Your doctor can order a blood test for you.

## What if the blood test is positive?

If you have a positive result, your doctor may order a second blood test. The second test will:

- find out if the living virus is really in your blood, and
- check out the state of your liver.

A small number of people get very mild cases of Hepatitis C. They are able to get rid of the disease within six months. But when these people have a blood test, antibody to HCV can show up. So a second test is needed to find out if the living virus is really there.

In most cases, people with HCV infection do NOT get rid of it. They have HCV infection for the rest of their lives.

If you have Hepatitis C, your family doctor may suggest you see a doctor who knows a lot about liver disease (a specialist). This doctor can help you decide if you need treatment.

## How do I live with Hepatitis C?

You may need to make some changes in your life.

You will have to:

- Eat food that will keep you healthy.
- Stop drinking alcohol (this means NO beer, wine or any kind of alcohol).
- Consider getting shots (or vaccinations) to make sure you NEVER get Hepatitis A or Hepatitis B. If you get these other kinds of hepatitis, your liver might not be able to handle the added stress.

The Canadian Liver Foundation can help you learn more about Hepatitis C. It runs support groups for people with Hepatitis C and has a free phone line. **The number to call is 1-800-563-5483.**

## What kinds of treatment are there?

For those whose Hepatitis C is more advanced, drug treatment may be appropriate and must be administered after careful assessment by your doctor. Various types of interferon-alpha are available. The best treatment strategy may be to use two antiviral drugs together. Recent studies indicate that a combination of antiviral drugs (interferon alfa-2b plus ribavirin) is more effective than interferon alfa-2b alone. New drugs are being developed. Herbal treatments have not been particularly helpful for treatment of Hepatitis C.

## What happens as I get older?

Most people feel well for years. Having Hepatitis C for a long time is called having chronic Hepatitis C. About 20 out of 100 people with chronic Hepatitis C will get bad scars in their liver. This is called cirrhosis of the liver.

A small proportion of people with chronic Hepatitis C get liver cancer.

People with bad liver damage from Hepatitis C may need a liver transplant.

## If I have Hepatitis C, how can I make sure I don't pass it on?

- Do not donate blood, organs for transplants or semen for artificial insemination.
- Do not share your razor or toothbrush.
- Do not use illegal drugs. If you do, never share needles or drug-related equipment.
- Tell any doctor or nurse who takes blood samples from you that you have Hepatitis C.
- Before you have sex, tell your partner that you have Hepatitis C.
- Practise safer sex by using a condom.

The Canadian Liver Foundation was founded in 1969. It was the first group in the world to provide support for research and education into the cause, prevention and treatment of all liver diseases. The Foundation runs programs to help patients, families and the general public understand and cope with liver disease. The Canadian Liver Foundation has 30 volunteer chapters across Canada.

Because the HCV can cause serious liver disease, the Canadian Liver Foundation provides information and education about this common infection.

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Funding for this fact sheet was provided by Health Canada.

November 1999

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