

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection that is carried in the blood and can cause severe damage to the liver. The World Health Organization estimates that up to three per cent of the world's population is infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV), including more than 110,000 Ontarians. However, one third of those infected with HCV in Ontario have not yet been diagnosed.

How is it transmitted?

Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) which is spread by direct contact with the blood of an infected person. Situations that put people most at risk for getting hepatitis C include:

- Sharing used needles or syringes (for steroid, prescription or street drug use) or other drug using equipment such as cookers, cotton, water and crack pipes (including short-term use in the past)
- Sharing straws used for snorting
- Having received a blood transfusion or blood products prior to 1992, after which sensitive tests for anti-HCV were introduced for blood screening
- Needle-stick injuries
- Non-sterile equipment used for tattooing, piercing and acupuncture

Lower risks of transmission include:

- Sexual activity that includes contact with blood or the exchange of blood
- Birth when the mother is infected with HCV

How do I protect myself from getting hepatitis C?

- Do not share needles or drug-using equipment
- Wear protective gloves if you are likely to be in contact with someone else's blood

- Avoid blood-to-blood contact during sexual activity
- If you are getting a tattoo, body piercing or acupuncture, choose a reputable service and ensure that only fresh, single-use, disposable needles are used and that all equipment is sterile.

How can I be affected by hepatitis C?

The hepatitis C virus is able to change repeatedly in order to fight off the body's immune system. It causes inflammation and will slowly damage the liver over a period of ten to 20 years, often without an individual ever being aware that the virus is inside their body. Without treatment, over 80 per cent of acute HCV infections progress to chronic hepatitis C, a long-term, progressive condition that can lead to liver disease, including cirrhosis and in some cases, cancer.

What are the common symptoms?

Although some people may experience symptoms following infection, most have no symptoms at all. Because the disease progresses slowly, symptoms can appear many years after infection. Symptoms could include:

- Jaundice (skin or eyes turn yellow)
- Generalized itching.

See your health care provider if symptoms of hepatitis C develop, or if you believe you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus.

How is hepatitis C detected?

If you think you may have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus based on the risk factors listed above, ask your health care provider to test you. If the results are positive, your health care provider may order a second test to confirm that the virus is really in your blood. If you are infected, talk to your health care provider about treatment options.

If I have hepatitis C, what can I do to stay healthy?

Make sure you get plenty of rest and avoid alcohol. Even moderate amounts of alcohol will speed up the progression of hepatitis C and reduce the effectiveness of drugs you may be taking to combat the disease. You should also talk to your health care provider about hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccination.

If I have hepatitis C, how can I prevent infecting others?

- Do not donate blood, organs for transplants or semen for artificial insemination
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, manicure or pedicure equipment
- If you use drugs, do not share needles or other drug-related equipment
- Always tell health care providers who may be exposed to your blood that you have hepatitis C
- Avoid blood-to-blood contact during sexual activity.

Want to learn more?

For more information, call 1-877-234-4343
(TTY 1-800-387-5559) or visit www.health.gov.on.ca/hepC