

Getting Tested for Hepatitis C



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What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus. People can get hepatitis C when blood carrying the virus gets into their bloodstream. Once inside, it infects the liver and causes damage to this very important organ. The more damage there is, the harder it is for the liver to do its job and people can become very sick.

For some people who get hepatitis C, the virus goes away on its own within the first six months after infection. For most people, the virus is still in the body after six months. At this point, hepatitis C will not go away on its own, but there is treatment that can get rid of the virus from the body.

How is hepatitis C spread?

These are some of the ways hepatitis C can get inside the body:

- Re-using tools for activities that break the skin, such as tattooing or body piercing;
- Sharing or borrowing personal items that might have blood on them, such as razors, nail clippers and toothbrushes;
- During pregnancy or childbirth, a woman who has hepatitis C can pass the virus to her baby;
- Using injection or snorting drug equipment that has been used by someone else;
- Getting a blood transfusion or an organ transplant that has not been screened for hepatitis C;
- Re-using medical equipment that should only be used once, such as needles for vaccines; and
- Having unprotected sex where blood could be present.

Why should I be tested for hepatitis C?

- Testing is the only way to find out if you have hepatitis C;
- There are close to 250,000 people living with hepatitis C in Canada. Many people who have hepatitis C don't know that they have it;
- Many people do not show any symptoms until many years after getting hepatitis C; and
- There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. The only way to prevent hepatitis C is by avoiding the virus.

How do I get tested for hepatitis C?

It takes two blood tests to know that you have hepatitis C.

- **The first test: hepatitis C antibody testing** is used to see if a person has ever come in contact with hepatitis C. When hepatitis C first enters the bloodstream, the immune system in the body produces antibodies against the virus. The hepatitis C antibody test looks for hepatitis C antibodies in the blood.
- **A negative test** result means that a person has never come in contact with hepatitis C.
- **A positive test** result means that a person came in contact with hepatitis C at some point. But, antibodies stay in the body even when someone clears the virus. Follow-up testing is important because a second test shows if the virus is still in the body.
- **The second test: Virus testing** checks for active hepatitis C infection. A negative virus test result means that a person does not have hepatitis C. A positive test result means that a person does have hepatitis C.

What if my test result is negative?

If the test results show no hepatitis C virus in your body, your health care provider should talk to you about:

- Protecting yourself from getting infected with hepatitis C or other infections like hepatitis A and B or HIV in the future; and
- Looking after your health and visiting your health care provider regularly.

What if my test result is positive?

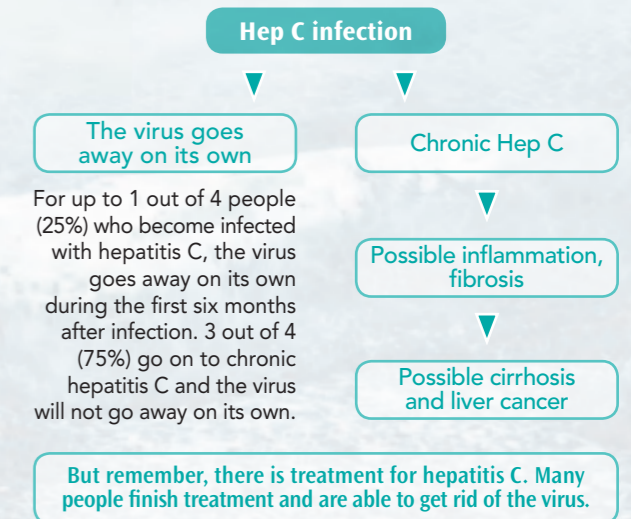
If you have tested positive for hepatitis C, the good news is that with the right treatment, hepatitis C can be cleared. There are also many things you can do for yourself to stay healthy. Your health care provider should talk to you about:

- Taking care of your liver so you don't cause it more harm;
- Protecting others from getting hepatitis C;
- Protecting yourself from getting another strain of hepatitis C or another infection like HIV or hepatitis B; and
- Treatment for hepatitis C and where to get more information about it.

Remember

- Hepatitis C is a virus that lives in the liver. It is spread through different kinds of blood-to-blood contact when hepatitis C is present;
- A person can have hepatitis C for many years without symptoms, even though the virus may be damaging the liver;
- The only way to know if a person has hepatitis C is to get tested;

- There is treatment for hepatitis C. Many people finish treatment and are able to get rid of the virus;
- Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing, or shaking hands or being around someone who is sneezing or coughing;
- Hepatitis C is not found in water or food; and
- Inform yourself. There is help and support available.



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