

Hepatitis C: What you need to know

Hepatitis C is an infection caused by the hepatitis C virus, which is carried in the blood. This virus can cause liver disease, including cirrhosis and cancer.

More than 110,000 people in Ontario are infected with the hepatitis C virus. Often there are no symptoms for many years, and about 35,000 Ontarians do not realize they are infected.

How you could become infected

You are at risk of hepatitis C infection if you share blood. For instance:

- Sharing used needles or syringes (for steroid, prescription or street drug use)
- Sharing other drug-using equipment such as cookers, cotton, crack cocaine and water pipes (even if you only shared them once or briefly)
- Sharing straws, bills or other utensils used for snorting cocaine or other drugs
- Receiving a blood transfusion or blood products before 1992
- Needle-stick injuries
- Tattooing, piercing or acupuncture with equipment that may have been improperly sterilized
- Many of the risk factors listed above are also associated with HIV (See **Co-infection with HIV**)

Lower risks of infection:

- Sexual activity that includes contact with blood or exchange of blood
- An expectant mother carrying the hepatitis C virus can infect her unborn baby
- Sharing razors, toothbrushes, tweezers, manicure or pedicure equipment (such as nail clippers)

How to protect yourself from infection

- Do not share needles or drug-using equipment
- Do not share personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, tweezers, manicure or pedicure 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 or piercing, make sure that:
 - (a) the service you choose is regulated or inspected
 - (b) the needle is single-use disposable and has never been used (if you're getting acupuncture, make sure the needles are sterile)
 - (c) all other equipment is sterile

How the hepatitis C virus can affect you

Without treatment, over 80 percent of hepatitis C infections progress to chronic hepatitis C, a disease that attacks your liver. After 10 to 20 years, chronic hepatitis C can cause cirrhosis. After 20 to 40 years it can cause liver cancer.

Common symptoms

Because hepatitis C progresses slowly, most infected people experience no symptoms at all for many years after being infected. If you do have symptoms, they could include:

- Jaundice (your skin or eyes turn yellow)
- Itching in different parts of your body

See your health care provider if you believe you may have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus.

How hepatitis C is detected

If you believe you may have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus, ask your health care provider to test you. If the results show that you have the hepatitis C virus in your blood, your health care provider may order a second test to confirm it. If you are infected, talk to your health care provider about treatment options.

Co-infection with HIV

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and the hepatitis C virus (HCV) are both carried in the blood. Some risk factors are common to both HIV and hepatitis C; for instance, sharing drug-using equipment such as needles, cookers, cotton, crack cocaine and water pipes. If you are concerned that you may have been exposed by sharing drug-using equipment, talk to your health care provider about testing for hepatitis C as well as HIV.

Treatment

There are effective treatments for hepatitis C. Your health care provider will discuss with you what treatment is available and assess whether it is appropriate for you. Treatment takes from 24 to 48 weeks.

How to maintain your health if you have hepatitis C

Get plenty of rest and avoid alcohol. Even moderate amounts of alcohol will speed up the progression of the disease and reduce the effectiveness of treatment drugs. You should also talk to your health care provider about hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccinations. *There is no vaccination against hepatitis C.*

How to avoid infecting others if you have hepatitis C

- Do not donate blood, organs for transplants or semen for artificial insemination
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, tweezers, manicure or pedicure equipment
- If you use drugs, do not share needles or other drug-related equipment
- Always remember to tell health care providers about your condition if it is possible that they may be exposed to your blood
- 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)
- Visit www.hepOntario.ca
- Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care website, www.health.gov.on.ca/hepatitec