



Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C may eventually cause permanent liver damage such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer in the later stages of the disease.

An estimated 270 to 300 million people worldwide are infected with hepatitis C.

How does hepatitis C spread?

Hepatitis C is spread through direct blood-to-blood contact with an infected person. Hepatitis C is not spread through hugging, kissing, coughing or sharing eating utensils.

Who can get hepatitis C?

Situations that put people most at risk for getting hepatitis C include:

- Past or current sharing of contaminated needles, syringes, straws or other drug related equipment
- Having received a blood transfusion or blood products prior to 1990, after which sensitive blood screening tests were introduced
- Having a needle-stick injury
- Using non-sterile equipment for tattooing, piercing, acupuncture and medical or dental procedures
- Sharing razors, toothbrushes and/or nail scissors/clippers/files

Lower risks of transmission include:

- Sexual activity that includes contact with blood or the exchange of blood (e.g., during menstruation)
- Childbirth, when the mother is infected with hepatitis C

What are the sign and symptoms for hepatitis C?

Acute Hepatitis C refers to the first six months after infection with the virus. Between 60% and 70% of people infected do not develop symptoms during the acute phase. However, if symptoms do occur they typically include:

- Flu-like symptoms
- Jaundice
- Dark urine
- Muscle pain

For further information, please call:
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- Loss of appetite
- Joint pain
- Fatigue

The time between exposure to the virus and development of symptoms is six weeks on average, but can be shorter or longer. Following infection, the hepatitis C virus causes inflammation which slowly damages the liver over the next 10 to 20 years, often without an individual being aware of the infection. This is a long-term, progressive condition that can lead to liver disease, including cirrhosis and in some cases, liver cancer. The 20 percent or more who do not become chronic hepatitis C carriers will still remain positive for the antibody test for life.

Factors that have been reported to influence the rate of progression of the disease include: age (increasing age is associated with more rapid progression), gender (males have more rapid disease progression than females), alcohol consumption, HIV co-infection and fatty liver (presence of fat in liver cells has been associated with an increased rate of disease progression).

How do I find out if I have hepatitis C?

You can have a blood test to find out if you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. The test can detect antibodies to hepatitis C in your blood as early as eight weeks after a possible exposure in most people, but ideally should be done after 14 to 20 weeks to be certain. A positive antibody test indicates previous exposure, but not immunity. A blood test to detect the presence of the actual virus (HCV-PCR) can be ordered by your health care provider.

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

There is treatment for hepatitis C. You will need to be assessed by your family physician and referred to a specialist for follow-up.

Anyone infected with hepatitis C should ask their health care provider to do an assessment for hepatitis A and B. If needed, your health care provider can obtain free hepatitis A and/or B vaccine from York Region Community and Health Services.

How can it be prevented?

Be sure to treat all blood and body fluids as potentially infectious. Disinfect any non-disposable equipment that has been in contact with body fluids. Apply a solution of one part bleach mixed with nine parts water, and leave it on the contaminated surface for at least ten minutes.

Drug users should not share their needles, spoons and other drug use equipment.

People who carry the hepatitis C virus can do the following to prevent spreading it to others:

- Inform your sexual partners. Practise safer sex by using latex condoms
- Do not donate blood, blood products, organ tissues and semen
- Keep cuts and lesions covered
- Inform your health care providers that you have hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a reportable disease. York Region Community and Health Services must be notified so appropriate case and contact follow up can be done.

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