

Hepatitis C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the Hepatitis C virus (HCV). Twenty to thirty per cent of people infected with Hepatitis C will become ill within weeks to months of exposure. Of these, 75-85 percent will have only a mild illness.

Sixty to seventy percent of people infected with Hepatitis C display no symptoms, but become carriers of the Hepatitis C virus and can spread to others. Hepatitis is a concern as it may eventually cause liver damage such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or cancer.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is spread through direct blood-to-blood contact with a person infected with HCV.

Prior to blood screening in June 1990, Hepatitis C was most frequently transmitted through transfusion of infected blood and blood products. Since then, acquiring Hepatitis C through infected blood products has been quite rare.

Currently, drug users who share needles, spoons, straws and other drug related equipment are most likely to get Hepatitis C. Approximately 60-80 percent of injection drug users have Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C can also be spread through the following:

- Tattooing and body piercing with contaminated equipment
- Sharing razors, toothbrushes, and nail scissors.
- Needlestick injuries.
- Sexual intercourse. This type of transmission is rare, but possible with traumatic sexual intercourse and intercourse during a woman's menstrual cycle.

Hepatitis C is not spread through kissing, coughing or sharing eating utensils.

Who can get Hepatitis C?

People who are in direct contact with blood are at risk for contracting Hepatitis C. Those at high risk for infection due to frequent exposure include:

- Injection drug users who share injecting equipment.
- People who have received blood/blood products prior to 1990.
- Persons in occupations where there is exposure to blood or blood products (health care workers, EMS workers, embalmers).
- Sexual partners of anyone with Hepatitis C. With multiple partners, the risk increases.
- Anyone getting body piercing, tattooing, or acupuncture with contaminated needles.

Is there a test to show I have had Hepatitis C?

There is a blood test that identifies if a person has been exposed to Hepatitis C, by detecting antibody development in the body. Antibodies may develop 2-6 months after initial exposure to HCV.

Symptoms of Hepatitis C

For most chronic carriers of Hepatitis C, no symptoms of the illness are evident, except fatigue. In acute hepatitis, symptoms may include flu-like illness, muscle pain, loss of appetite, joint pain and fatigue. A person who tests anti-HCV positive and presents with these symptoms may be a chronic carrier having an acute flare up of Hepatitis C.

Treatment

Presently, there is no cure for Hepatitis C. Patients who fit specific criteria may qualify for Rebetron treatment, which includes Alpha-interferon and Ribiviron. There are other treatments being developed and researched.

Prevention and Protection

Treat all blood and body fluids as potentially infectious. Use routine practices whenever you are in contact with body fluids. Use 1 part bleach to 10 parts water to sterilize any nondisposable equipment that has been in contact with patient/client body fluids.

Those who are carriers need to inform their sexual partners and may choose to use latex condoms during sexual intercourse.

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

Hepatitis C is a reportable disease. The Public Health Department *must be* notified so appropriate case and contact follow up is done.

**For further information, please call:
York Region Health Services *Health Connection*
1-800-361-5653
www.region.york.on.ca**