

Want more information?

### Hepatitis C Councils

Australian Hepatitis Council (02) 6232 4257

NSW (02) 9332 1599  
1800 803 990 (NSW country)

Victoria (03) 9639 3200  
1800 703 003 (VIC country)

Queensland (07) 3229 3767  
1800 648 491 (Qld country)

South Australia (08) 8362 8443  
1800 021 133 (SA country)

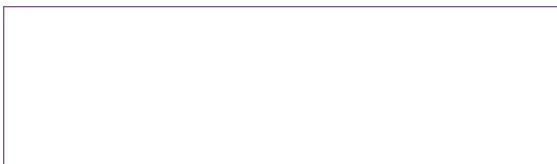
Western Australia (08) 9328 8538  
1800 800 070 (WA country)

Northern Territory 1800 353 755  
(Territory Health Service)

Tasmania (03) 6234 1242

Australian Capital Territory (02) 6253 9999  
1800 803 990 (NSW country)

Contact your local doctor or public hospital  
(Infectious Diseases Clinic, Hepatology Clinic)



# HEPATITIS C

information

HEPATITIS

**C**

Originally produced and translated by  
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in conjunction with  
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## Who this booklet is for

This is a booklet for people living with hepatitis C, their families and carers, and people who may be at risk of hepatitis C infection.

### What is hepatitis?

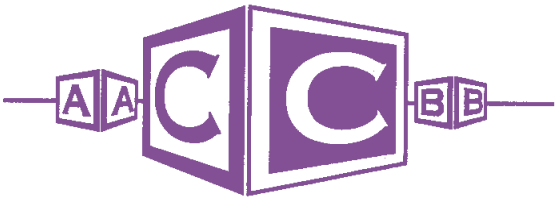
The word hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by a number of things, including viruses, alcohol and chemicals.

### What is “viral” hepatitis?

Viral hepatitis is an infectious disease that inflames the liver. Viral hepatitis is a major health problem all over the world. It can lead to cirrhosis (or scarring) of the liver, and in a small number of cases, liver cancer and death.

### What types of viral hepatitis are there?

The major types of viral hepatitis are hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. Hepatitis C was previously known as non-A/non-B hepatitis or “post transfusion hepatitis”. Hepatitis B and hepatitis C are the only two viruses that may cause scarring of the liver (cirrhosis). There are also other less common types of viral hepatitis.



## Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is transmitted when faeces (bowel motions) come into contact with another person's mouth. This can happen through eating contaminated food or drink, or certain sexual activities. Symptoms usually develop 28-30 days after infection and may include stomach pain, loss of appetite, nausea, mild fever, tiredness and in some cases yellow skin and eyes (jaundice). Most people infected make a complete recovery and are immune to re-infection. A vaccination is available to prevent hepatitis A.

## Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact, sex with an infected person or the sharing of drug-injecting equipment. Not everyone experiences symptoms. About 30-50% of adults and fewer than 10% of children experience symptoms when they get infected. These symptoms may include stomach pain, nausea and vomiting, joint pain and yellow skin and eyes (jaundice). Most people recover fully; however, 5-10% of people will continue to carry the virus and will be able to transmit it to others. The hepatitis B vaccination is available as a course of three injections over a six-month period. A vaccination that can immunise against both hepatitis A and B is also available.

## Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact. In 1997, there were approximately 190,000 Australians infected with hepatitis C, of whom 134,000 had chronic hepatitis C (infection lasting six months or more), and are at risk of cirrhosis and/or liver cancer. There are about 11,000 new infections annually in Australia. About 90% of these infections are due to unsafe injecting practices including sharing of drug-injecting equipment.

There is no preventive vaccine for hepatitis C.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C affects people in different ways. Most people experience **no symptoms**. A few people have acute symptoms (8-12 weeks after becoming infected) that may include:

- Nausea
- Constant tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Discomfort in the liver area
- Joint pain
- Jaundice (not common)

About 75% of people with hepatitis C will develop chronic infection (lasting six months or more). Chronic or long term symptoms can take between 10-15 years to appear. The most common chronic symptoms are constant tiredness, pain (especially in the liver region), and nausea. Symptoms of chronic hepatitis C are usually mild, but sometimes severe.

## Is hepatitis C serious?

Yes, it can be.

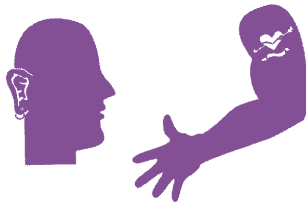
Research shows that of 100 people infected with hepatitis C, 25 people will clear the virus from their bodies completely within 2 to 6 months of infection, but will continue to carry antibodies (the body's immune response to the virus) for some time. People who clear the virus tend to be younger when they were infected, and were only infected once.

About 75 of 100 people infected with hepatitis C who do not clear the virus will have an ongoing or chronic infection and are at risk of developing cirrhosis of the liver. Of the 75 people who develop chronic hepatitis C, approximately 20 people may never experience noticeable illness or symptoms. Although they can transmit hepatitis C to others, they won't develop illness or liver disease.

After an average of 15 years, between 40 and 60 people with chronic hepatitis C will experience some symptoms and will develop some level of long-term liver damage.

After 20 to 40 years, between 8 and 20 people with hepatitis C will develop cirrhosis of the liver. Between 2 and 5 of these people will experience liver failure or develop a form of liver cancer known as hepatocellular carcinoma.

This is a general guide only. Each person's experience with hepatitis C may be different from this. Remember that you may feel well, but the damage to your liver caused by hepatitis C may still be progressing. If you drink alcohol, your chances of developing more serious liver damage, such as cirrhosis of the liver, are high. It is also possible to become infected with hepatitis C more than once. This will add to the strain on your liver.



### **How is hepatitis C transmitted from one person to another?**

Hepatitis C is transmitted when the blood of a person with hepatitis C gets into the bloodstream of another person. This can happen in a number of ways.

#### **1. Tattooing and body and ear piercing (skin penetration)**

Tattooing, body and ear piercing have existed in various forms in many cultures throughout history. There is a risk of hepatitis C infection from tattooing or body piercing practices and equipment that are unsterile or unhygienic. Hepatitis C can also be transmitted through other practices, for example, by not changing inks and ointments between use, or applying tattoo stencils with roll-on deodorant sticks that have been used on other customers.

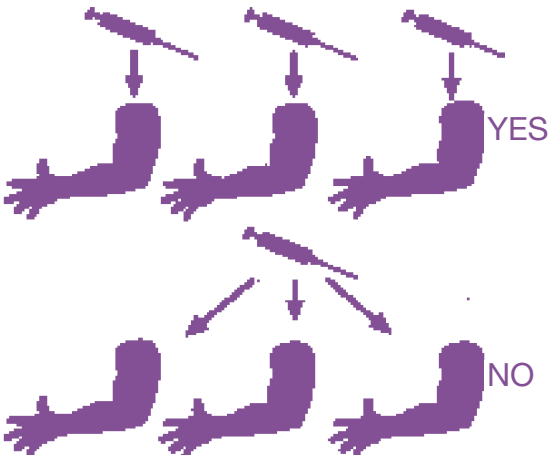
All equipment used to penetrate the skin surface must be sterilised. The environment should be clean and hygienic. The operator should use clean disposable gloves at all times during a skin penetration procedure. Always check that the tattooist is registered or approved under relevant State licensing laws where these are in place. Always ask if the equipment that is being used on you has been sterilised. Check that the inks used on you are measured out onto a new, single use plastic tray. Contact your Health Department if you need more information on skin penetration activity.

## 2. Receiving blood transfusions, blood products and body organs

All blood transfusions, blood products and body organs in Australia have been tested for hepatitis C since 1990. However, in many other countries testing is not available. People receiving blood transfusions overseas may have an increased risk of becoming infected. In Australia, you cannot become infected with hepatitis C by donating blood.

## 3. Vaccination with unsterile equipment

In the past, many people have been infected through the use of unsterile injection equipment during mass vaccination programs. In Australia all injecting equipment for vaccinations is sterilised; however, in some countries equipment is not sterilised. Hepatitis C can be transmitted easily from person to person through mass vaccination with unsterile equipment.



#### 4. Contact with blood

Contact with another persons' blood may increase the risk of contracting hepatitis C. Always use gloves when handling someone else's blood. If you get blood on your clothes, tourniquet or other washable items, throw them straight into the wash with a good measure of washing powder.



#### 5. Sharing drug-injecting equipment

Hepatitis C can be transmitted:

- Through blood in a syringe that someone else has used;
- Through blood left in the water, spoon or filter by a used needle and syringe;
- From blood left on a tourniquet that brushes against the injection site;
- From blood left on a person's finger (when they apply pressure after their shot) which ends up on your skin when they help you inject;
- From blood left on the filter by someone tearing it up after their shot;
- From blood on used swabs; and
- From blood you get on your own hands after touching an object or surface that someone else with blood on their fingers has touched.

If you inject drugs, it is safest to use a sterile needle and syringe, sterile water, sterile swabs (one to swab your spoon, and the other to swab your arm), a clean filter, a clean tourniquet, clean hands (wash them before and after injecting) and a clean injecting space. New needles and syringes are available from needle and syringe programs and some pharmacies **DO NOT SHARE ANY** equipment with other people. It is not illegal in Australia to possess needles and syringes.

Needle and Syringe Programs provide a range of equipment used to inject drugs such as needle and syringes, sterile swabs and water. Needle and Syringe Programs also provide referral to drug treatment programs, medical care, legal and social services, and sexual health education. They also collect used injecting equipment and provide sharps bins for safe disposal.

## 6. Needlestick (or sharps) injury

Accidental puncturing of the skin with a needle and syringe used by an infected person may transmit hepatitis C.

Always dispose of needles and syringes safely in sealed, childproof, puncture-proof plastic containers. These containers are available from Needle and Syringe Programs and some pharmacies.



### Can hepatitis C be passed from one person to another through kissing?

No. Hepatitis C is only spread through blood-to-blood contact. Hepatitis C cannot be transmitted through kissing, hugging, sharing eating and drinking utensils, showers or toilets.

### Can hepatitis C be transmitted through sharing razors and toothbrushes?

It is possible for hepatitis C to be transmitted through sharing personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, nail files, or nail scissors. These personal items can puncture the skin and become contaminated with blood that may then pass into another person's bloodstream through sores, cuts, grazes or scratches.

### Can hepatitis C be spread through sexual intercourse?

Hepatitis C is not commonly transmitted through sexual intercourse. There is a risk if one partner has hepatitis C and their blood is present during sexual intercourse. A condom or dental dam should always be used when blood is present.

## Can hepatitis C be spread through contact sports activities?

This is most unlikely especially where sports have appropriate “blood rules” in force. There have been no cases of this mode of infection documented. There is no reason to avoid contact sport participation.

## Does hepatitis C spread from mother to baby during pregnancy?



Hepatitis C is not transmitted easily from mother to baby. However, transmission is more likely to occur if the mother has HIV as well as hepatitis C, or becomes infected with hepatitis C during pregnancy. If hepatitis C is present in the mother’s bloodstream during pregnancy or birth, there is a risk of the baby getting hepatitis C. Transmission of hepatitis C through breastmilk does not occur, but women with hepatitis C are advised not to breastfeed if they have cracked or bleeding nipples.

## Can I be infected with hepatitis C more than once?

In people who clear hepatitis C, reinfection is possible. Mixed infection with more than one genotype of the hepatitis C virus is also possible. Mixed infection may be associated with the rapid progression of liver disease.

## What does a hepatitis C antibody test involve?

A hepatitis C antibody test involves taking a small amount of blood from a vein in the arm. The blood is then sent to a laboratory to be tested. The test detects antibodies to the hepatitis C virus. It may take the body two weeks to six months to produce enough antibodies for the test to determine whether a person has been infected with hepatitis C. Talk to your doctor if you are considering having a test.

## What does a liver function test involve?

A liver function test (LFT) is a blood test used to show if your liver is being damaged. It is usually performed every 6-12 months for people with hepatitis C. See your doctor who will tell you if a test is needed.



## Is there any treatment for hepatitis C?

There are two drugs approved for hepatitis C treatment: interferon and ribavirin. Not everyone can be given these drugs. There are certain criteria for people with hepatitis C to qualify for these treatments, and there can be unwanted side effects. The treatment is available through a specialised service only.

Some people use natural and alternative treatments like acupuncture and herbs. Speak with a qualified accredited natural therapy practitioner for more information.

Whatever you choose, it is important to find out as much as possible about different treatment options. Keeping in touch with your doctor and the Hepatitis C Council in your State or Territory will help you to keep informed of new developments in hepatitis C treatments.

There are several things you can do to improve your health and ability to cope with hepatitis C. These practices are just as good to follow whether you have hepatitis C or may be at risk of infection:

- Maintain a healthy diet
- Reduce alcohol intake
- Cut down on smoking
- Get plenty of rest
- Reduce/manage stress
- Exercise regularly (low to moderate exercise such as yoga, walking, and swimming)
- If you inject drugs, consider other options such as smoking, snorting or swallowing them



Alcohol causes further damage to the liver and increases the risk of developing cirrhosis. If you can't stop drinking alcohol altogether, you can reduce the amount of alcohol you drink by:

- Using low alcohol drinks
- Avoiding binge drinking and heavy drinking
- Alternating with non-alcoholic drinks

Smoking has been shown to damage people's health and increase their risk of heart disease. Cutting down on smoking, or giving it up, may improve your overall health and help you to cope better if you have hepatitis C.

Reducing the damage to your liver is vital for you to stay healthy.

### **Who should I tell that I have hepatitis C?**

Before telling anyone you have hepatitis C, consider who you want to tell and why. It's a good idea to talk about hepatitis C only when you are ready. Legally, you do not have to tell anyone except the blood bank that you have hepatitis C, unless you are a health care worker performing "exposure prone" procedures (see the section below about **Telling employers**).

It is a legal requirement for health care workers to report all positive hepatitis C antibody test results to the Health Department. This information is coded for your confidentiality. The Health Department needs to know this information to understand:

- how many people are becoming infected with hepatitis C;
- where infections are occurring; and
- where to direct health resources to prevent new infections and care for people already infected with hepatitis C.

### **Telling your family**

Whether to tell your family is a decision only you can make. You may be surprised at how supportive your family can be when they learn you have hepatitis C. Don't underestimate them. Think carefully about how, when, where and why you want to tell them about having hepatitis C. Your doctor, Hepatitis C Councils and counsellors can help you decide who to tell and how to handle their questions and reactions.

## **Telling health care workers**

When you visit a health care worker (your doctor, a medical specialist, nurse or dentist), you may be asked about your personal health history, including whether you have had hepatitis C or liver disease.

You do not have to tell health care workers if you have hepatitis C. However, being able to talk openly about your health needs means getting treatment based on good information about your health. If you are concerned about how the information you give to your health care worker will be used, discuss it with them.

It is illegal for health care workers to disclose your health status to anyone without your permission, except the initial report to the Health Department about a positive hepatitis C antibody test result.

It is also illegal for your health service interpreter to disclose your health status without your permission.

It is possible that you will know the interpreter personally. If you do not feel comfortable about face-to-face interpreter services being provided, you have the right to request that an interstate telephone interpreter be provided when discussing your health. Talk to your health care worker if this is what you want.

## **Telling employers**

There is no reason for you to tell your employer unless you are a health care worker performing “exposure-prone” procedures (medical procedures where there is a risk of you being cut and bleeding onto a patient). If this is the case, you need to find out what your State/Territory Health Department policy is regarding health care workers with hepatitis C.

## **What if I am discriminated against because I have hepatitis C?**

Telling people you have hepatitis C may expose you to various forms of discrimination. Discrimination means that people treat you differently after they find out that you have hepatitis C. Most discrimination comes from people who know little about hepatitis C and make wrong assumptions. It's difficult to tell how people will react. A good start is to learn as much as you can about hepatitis C so that you can educate people.

It is against the law for anyone to discriminate against you because you have hepatitis C, with the possible exception of insurance or superannuation companies.

You cannot be denied access to education, refused accommodation or be fired because you have hepatitis C, and you are protected from this sort of discrimination under the Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992. In addition, most States have their own anti-discrimination legislation. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 also guarantees your right to receive medical treatment.

If you feel that you have been discriminated against, make some notes immediately about what was said and what happened. This will help you prepare a formal complaint. Get advice on what to do next from the services listed in the back of this booklet.