Hepatitis C Basics

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The basics on hepatitis C transmission, testing and how it affects the liver

Hepatitis C is a virus that injures the liver.

The liver is a very important organ in your body. It helps the body fight infections, break down toxins (poisons) and drugs, digest food, and more. You can’t live without it.

You can have hepatitis C and not know it.

You can live with hepatitis C for 20 to 30 years or more without feeling sick even though the virus is injuring the liver. Over time, the injury to the liver gets worse, making it hard for this organ to work properly.

For more about hepatitis C and what it does to the body, please visit our Intro to hepatitis C.

For more about living with hepatitis C, please visit Living with hepatitis C.
Hepatitis C statistics

- The epidemiology of hepatitis C in Canada – CATIE fact sheet

For more on hepatitis C statistics, please visit Epidemiology of hepatitis C in Strengthening Programming.

Testing is the only way to find out if you have hepatitis C.

It usually takes two blood tests to tell whether you have hepatitis C. The first test (an antibody test) checks to see if you have ever come in contact with the virus. The second test (a PCR or RNA test) checks to see if you have a hepatitis C infection right now.

For more on hepatitis C testing, please visit Testing for hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is passed blood to blood.

The virus gets into the blood through breaks in the skin or in the lining of the nose and mouth. Hepatitis C is a strong virus: it can live outside of the body for many days. This means dried blood can also pass the virus.

The main ways hepatitis C can get inside the body:

- Re-using drug equipment that was used by someone else. This includes needles, syringes, filters, cookers, acidifiers, alcohol swabs, tourniquets, water, pipes for smoking crack or crystal meth, and straws for snorting.
- Re-using tools for piercing and tattooing, including needles, ink and ink pots. Also re-using tools for electrolysis or acupuncture.
- Re-using medical equipment that was meant to be used only once, such as needles for vaccines or medicines, or medical equipment that was not cleaned properly before re-use.
- Getting a blood transfusion or organ transplant that was not screened for Hepatitis C. In Canada, donated blood has been screened for Hepatitis C since 1990. In some other countries, blood was not able to be screened until more recently.
Other ways hepatitis C can get inside the body:

- Sharing or borrowing personal care items that might have blood on them, such as razors, nail clippers and toothbrushes.
- Having anal sex without a condom, especially when blood is present and when one of the partners has HIV or another sexually transmitted infection.

For more on how hepatitis C passes on from person to person, please see How hepatitis C transmission happens.

For ways to prevent hepatitis C, please see Prevention & Harm Reduction.

Treatment can cure hepatitis C.

About one in four people clear hepatitis C without treatment, but most people need treatment to cure hepatitis C. Newer treatments now available in Canada are much more effective than older hepatitis C drugs. They are also easier to take, have fewer side effects and are taken for a shorter time.

For more on curing hepatitis C, please see hepatitis C Treatment.

Hepatitis C is different from hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

Hepatitis A and hepatitis B can also affect the liver. These viruses are easy to confuse with hepatitis C.

The main differences are:

- Most people clear hepatitis A and hepatitis B after a period of sickness, but people can have hepatitis C for years without knowing it.
- There are vaccines to protect against hepatitis A and hepatitis B, but there is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

For more on the different kinds of hepatitis virus, please see Other types of hepatitis.
Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV- and hepatitis C-related illness and the treatments in question.

CATIE provides information resources to help people living with HIV and/or hepatitis C who wish to manage their own health care in partnership with their care providers. Information accessed through or published or provided by CATIE, however, is not to be considered medical advice. We do not recommend or advocate particular treatments and we urge users to consult as broad a range of sources as possible. We strongly urge users to consult with a qualified medical practitioner prior to undertaking any decision, use or action of a medical nature.

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