

hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis C is an infection caused by a virus that affects the liver.

How do you get hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis C is found in the blood of someone who has hepatitis C.
- Most people get hepatitis C from sharing needles or other drug use equipment (e.g. straws/bills for snorting, crack pipes) with someone who has hepatitis C. Cleaning drug equipment with bleach does not prevent hepatitis C.
- You can get hepatitis C from any unsterilized tools used during activities that cut the skin such as tattooing or piercing.
- Hepatitis C is rarely transmitted through unprotected sexual activities or sex toy sharing with someone who has hepatitis C unless blood is involved.
- A pregnant person with hepatitis C can sometimes pass it on to their fetus during pregnancy or during vaginal* delivery.
- You can also get hepatitis C from sharing personal items like toothbrushes or razors with someone who has the virus because these items may have blood on them.
- You cannot get hepatitis C from water, food, or casual contact.

How do you know if you have hepatitis C?

- The only way to know you have hepatitis C is to get tested.
- Most people do not have any symptoms and may not know they have it. You can pass on hepatitis C even if you don't have any symptoms.
- If symptoms do occur, they usually appear about 6-12 weeks after you get hepatitis C.
- Symptoms can include: feeling tired, pain in the abdomen (belly), yellowing of the skin, lack of appetite, nausea, a rash, joint pain, dark coloured urine (pee) and pale stools (poop). The most common symptom of hepatitis C is no symptom at all.

**We know that these aren't the words everyone uses for their bodies (eg. trans folks), and support you using the language that feels best for you.*

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- About 20% of people who get hepatitis C clear the virus from their bodies without any treatment. This means they cannot pass the virus on to someone else after they have cleared the virus. However, if you clear the virus, you can still get it again.
- The remaining 80% of people who get hepatitis C do not clear the virus. They have chronic hepatitis C. This means they will always have hepatitis C and can give it to other people. They may not have symptoms but can develop liver problems later in life.

How can you get tested for hepatitis C?

- A hepatitis C test is a blood test that looks for antibodies, a substance that the body produces in response to the hepatitis C virus. If you test positive for hepatitis C antibodies, you will be referred to a liver specialist for further testing and treatment options.
- Ask your health care provider if and how often you should be tested for hepatitis C.
- A pregnant person can sometimes pass hepatitis C on to their fetus during pregnancy or during vaginal delivery. If you are pregnant and have not been tested for hepatitis C, talk to your prenatal care provider.

What if you test positive for hepatitis C?

- There is currently no cure for hepatitis C. However, 20% of people who get the virus are able to clear it on their own.
- Chronic hepatitis C increases the risk of liver damage, including cirrhosis and liver cancer. People who don't clear the virus can use medications to help manage life-long hepatitis C and should have regular check-ups with their clinician.
- There are different strains of hepatitis C. Depending on the strain you have and your medical history, you may be able to take medication that increases your chances of clearing the virus.
- Hepatitis C is a reportable infection. This means that if you test positive for hepatitis C, you may be called by a public health nurse to get contact information for current and past sexual partners so that those people may be encouraged to get tested. Your name is not disclosed when a sexual partner is contacted.
- You can also contact current and past sexual partners yourself. If you wish to do so anonymously, you can use an email program called www.inspot.org.

How can you lower your risk of getting hepatitis C and/or passing it on to your partner(s)?

- Cleaning drug equipment with bleach does not prevent hepatitis C. For information on where to get clean needles and drug equipment, visit http://www.toronto.ca/health/sexualhealth/sh_the_works.htm.
- For tattooing, piercing and other activities that cut the skin, make sure the tools are new each time or have been properly sterilized.
- If you have sharing pipes, consider using lip balm to prevent chapped and/or cracked lips.

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- There is no vaccine available for hepatitis C at this time. Vaccination against hepatitis A and hepatitis B will not protect you against hepatitis C.
- Make informed decisions. Talk to your partner(s) about STIs and the use of safer sex tools.
- Use condoms on penises or dildos for vaginal or anal sex, use latex gloves for finger play and fisting, and use condoms/dams for oral sex to lower your chances of getting or transmitting hepatitis C.
- If you are sharing sex toys, be sure to disinfect them or put a new condom on them when a new person uses the toys.
- If you have hepatitis C, avoid sharing personal items such as razors and toothbrushes as these items may have blood on them.

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