

Hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that infects the liver. It has only been discovered in recent years and is the most common virus causing hepatitis. About 9 in 1000 Australians carry the virus in their blood.

How do you know if you have it?

It is diagnosed by a blood test—the hepatitis C antibody test. The result will not be positive until 2 to 3 months after picking up the virus.

How serious is the problem?

Many infections are mild, but unfortunately there is a high chance (almost 70%) of developing a simmering infection called chronic hepatitis C, which is a serious problem as it leads to cirrhosis of the liver.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is spread by blood, especially by sharing needles from intravenous drug use (most cases), or from tattooing and body piercing.

Before 1990 it was possible to get hepatitis C from blood transfusions, but since then blood from donors has been tested for hepatitis C. There appears to be a very small risk of spread during homosexual or heterosexual intercourse. It also does not spread easily through normal family or household contact so families and friends can be reassured. However, sharing razor blades and toothbrushes can spread the virus. Carriers have a responsibility to inform doctors, dentists and other close contacts about their problem.

What are the symptoms?

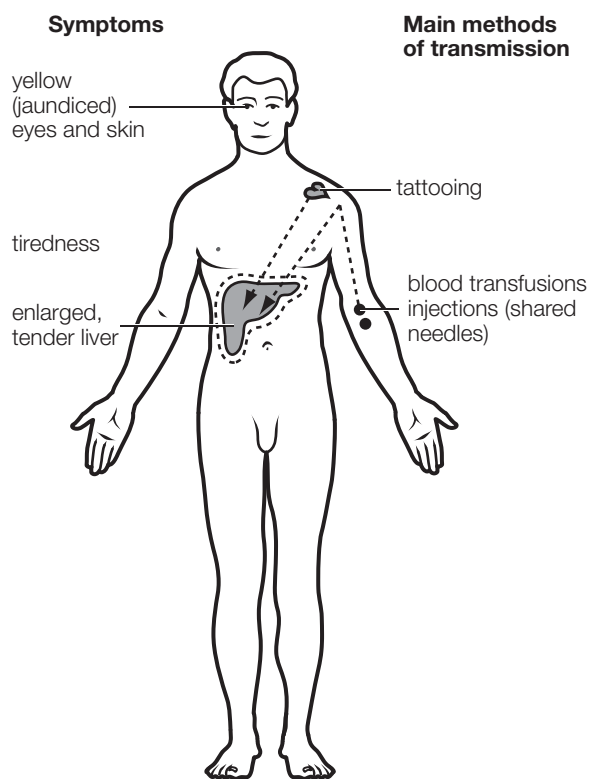
The symptoms vary from person to person and in many cases the infection may not cause any symptoms. Symptoms may take from 15 to 180 days to appear from the time of infection. The acute attack produces a flu-like illness with tiredness and yellow skin (jaundice). The serious chronic form comes on slowly, even after several years.

What happens with chronic hepatitis C?

Chronic hepatitis is more likely to occur with hepatitis C than with any of the other hepatitis viruses. This gradually causes damage to the healthy liver cells, causing hardening of the liver. This is called *cirrhosis*, which makes the liver fail and sometimes leads to cancer of the liver.

Who is at highest risk?

- Injecting drug users
- Sex industry workers
- Renal dialysis patients
- Tattooed people
- Prisoners (high level of drug injections)



How can the spread of hepatitis C be stopped?

If you have a positive hepatitis C test:

- Do not donate blood.
- Do not share needles.
- Advise health-care workers, including your dentist, about your hepatitis C.
- Do not share personal items (e.g. razors, toothbrushes).
- Wipe up blood spills with household bleach.
- Cover cuts and wounds with a firm dressing.
- Safely dispose of blood-stained tissues, tampons and the like.
- Practise 'safe' sex.

Is there a cure?

Some patients who are identified by DNA testing can be cured and there are new drugs to treat hepatitis C. The cure rate is gradually improving. Prevention is really the best 'cure'. There is no vaccine currently available.

What is the treatment?

- Rest if you feel unwell.
- Maintain a nutritious diet: well balanced and low fat.
- Avoid alcohol or have only small amounts upon recovery and do not smoke.
- Keep in touch with your doctor.
- Chronic hepatitis C can be treated with interferon and other antiviral drugs such as ribavirin in suitable patients.