

# Hepatitis C

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C may eventually cause permanent liver damage such as cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer in the later stages of the disease. An estimated 270 to 300 million people worldwide are infected with hepatitis C.

### Symptoms

Acute hepatitis C refers to the first six months after infection with the virus. Between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of people infected do not develop symptoms during the acute phase. However, if symptoms do occur they typically include:

- Flu-like symptoms
- Jaundice
- Dark urine
- Muscle pain
- Loss of appetite
- Joint pain
- Fatigue

The time between exposure to the virus and development of symptoms is six weeks on average.

Following infection, the hepatitis C virus causes inflammation which slowly damages the liver over the next 10 to 20 years, often without an individual being aware of the infection. This is a long-term,

progressive condition that can lead to liver disease, including cirrhosis and in some cases, liver cancer. Approximately 20 to 25 per cent of those infected with hepatitis C will spontaneously clear the virus but will remain positive for the antibody test for life.

Factors that have been associated with more rapid progression of the disease include: increasing age, gender (males have more rapid disease progression than females), alcohol consumption, HIV co-infection and fatty liver (presence of fat in liver cells).

### How it spreads

Hepatitis C is spread through direct blood-to-blood contact with an infected person. Hepatitis C is not spread through hugging, kissing, coughing or sharing utensils.



**1-800-361-5653**  
TTY: **1-866-252-9933**

York Region Health Connection

**Community and Health Services**

Public Health

[www.york.ca](http://www.york.ca)



## Situations that put people most at risk for getting hepatitis C include:

- Sharing injecting/non-injecting drug-related equipment (e.g. needles, syringes, straws, etc.)
- Having received a blood transfusion or blood products prior to 1990
- Having a needle-stick injury
- Using non-sterile equipment for tattooing, piercing, acupuncture, salon services (i.e. pedicure, manicure, electrolysis, and medical or dental procedures)
- Sharing personal hygienic items like razors, toothbrushes and/or nail scissors/clippers/files

## Lower risks of transmission:

- During pregnancy and childbirth, if the mother is infected with hepatitis C.
- Monogamous sexual relationships (It is estimated that the risk is about 2.5 per cent for prolonged exposure (longer than 20 years) to the uninfected partner.)

## Diagnosis

You can have a blood test to find out if you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. The test can detect antibodies to hepatitis C in your blood as early as eight weeks after a possible exposure in most people, but ideally should be done after 14 to 20 weeks to be certain. A positive antibody test indicates previous exposure, but not immunity. A blood test to detect the presence of the actual virus (HCV-PCR) can be ordered by your health care provider.

## Treatment

Treatment is available for hepatitis C. The treatment regimen can last up to a year. You will need to be assessed by your family physician and referred to a specialist for followup. Anyone infected with hepatitis C should ask their health care provider to do an

assessment for hepatitis A and B. If hepatitis A and/or hepatitis B vaccine is recommended, your health care provider can obtain it from York Region Community and Health Services at no cost.

## Protection

Be sure to treat all blood and body fluids as potentially infectious. Disinfect any non-disposable equipment that has been in contact with body fluids. Apply a solution of one-part bleach mixed with nine parts water, and leave it on the contaminated surface for at least ten minutes.

Drug users should not share their needles, spoons and other drug-related equipment with others.

People who carry the hepatitis C virus can do the following to prevent spreading it to others:

- Inform your sexual partners. Practice safer sex by using condoms from beginning to end of all oral, anal or vaginal sex.
- Do not donate blood, blood products, organ tissues and semen.
- Do not share personal hygiene items such as razor blades, toothbrushes, nail clippers, etc.
- Patients with diabetes should not share their glucometer and related equipment with others
- Keep cuts and lesions covered.
- Inform your health care providers that you have hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C is a reportable disease. York Region Community and Health Services must be notified so appropriate followup can be done.



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