

How Does Hepatitis C Affect the Liver?

Most people infected with the hepatitis C virus won't even know that they are infected, but they can still pass the virus on to someone else.

About 25 out of 100 people infected will clear the virus from their bodies within two to six months of infection. The others will develop chronic hepatitis C and carry the virus for life. (Chronic means that the virus is present for longer than 6 months.) Most of these people will have a normal life-span.

About 1 in 4 people with chronic hepatitis C will develop cirrhosis (scarring of the liver due to inflammation). The virus is slow-acting, taking about 15-20 years to cause cirrhosis. Cirrhosis can lead to liver failure but it does not always affect the life-span. A small number of these people may develop liver cancer.

There is no way to tell who will develop liver disease from hepatitis C. It is known that drinking alcohol will worsen liver damage if you have hepatitis C. So reducing the amount of alcohol you drink each day can affect the progress of the disease.

If you think you could have hepatitis C discuss your concerns with your doctor. Information and advice is also available from the Hepatitis Council of WA (Inc).

Where to Get Help & Information

The Hepatitis Council of WA (Inc) is a non government organisation, providing information, support, referral and pre and post test discussions. One to one support/ counseling is available for people infected with or affected by (partners, family etc.) hepatitis C. Educational sessions are available for businesses and community groups.

Telephone Information & Support
(9am - 5pm Monday to Friday)
(08) 9328 8538 Metro;
1800 800 070 Country;
or Email: info@hepatitiswa.com.au
Web site: www.hepatitiswa.com.au

For further information, contact your local doctor.

Information and advice is also available from:
ADIS (Alcohol and Drug Information Service) on
(08) 9442 5000 Metro; 1800 198 024 Country.
WASUA (Western Australian Substance User's
Association Inc on (08) 9227 7866.

Other Brochures:

Could You Have Hepatitis C?

Getting Tested for Hepatitis C: Pre-Test Information

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Hepatitis C and Your Liver

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Hepatitis Council of Western Australia



INFORMATION & SUPPORT

Metro 9328 8538
Country 1800 800 070

Did You Know?

Hepatitis C is a viral illness that affects the liver.

Over 250,000 Australians have chronic hepatitis C.

There are a number of different strains of the hepatitis C virus and it is possible to become co-infected with more than one strain.

There is **no vaccine** for the hepatitis C Virus, however **treatment** is available.

How Do You Get Hep C?

The hepatitis C (or HCV or Hep C) virus is spread by blood-to-blood contact. This means it is possible to get hepatitis C if an infected person's blood comes into contact with your own.

The most common ways that the hepatitis C virus is spread are:

- ◇ blood transfusions of infected blood (eg. before 1990 in Australia, or in other countries where blood screening is not a standard procedure);
- ◇ injecting drug use involving shared injecting equipment (including spoons, swabs, tourniquet & water);
- ◇ injury with contaminated sharp instruments or handling bloody items (eg. whilst at work or cleaning up a blood spill);
- ◇ tattooing with shared, contaminated equipment (including ink pots);
- ◇ body piercing with shared, contaminated equipment;
- ◇ vaccinations in other countries where the needle and syringe may have been used more than once; and
- ◇ sharing of personal grooming items like razors and tooth brushes.

What is a Virus?

Viruses are the smallest known organisms that cause infectious diseases. They grow inside the living cells of your body, and can only be seen through a microscope.

Viruses live at your body's expense. Instead of doing their normal jobs your infected cells provide food for the virus. The virus then increases in number within the body. The new viruses leave the exhausted cell and invade other cells of your body where they feed and multiply.

The hepatitis C virus damages liver cells, affecting the way the liver works. The hepatitis C virus has been found in liver cells, blood, and in special cells that seek out and kill invading organisms.

How might you feel?

Most people don't notice any symptoms when first infected with hepatitis C although some people report flu like illness. It can take years before you will notice any symptoms. Some people do not have noticeable symptoms for 20 years. Symptoms can come and go and vary in severity. You may experience fatigue and weakness. You may also find that you do not have as much energy as you used to, that you tire easily or feel generally unwell. You may feel nauseous after eating fatty foods or drinking alcohol. You may feel stressed or that everything is just too much to deal with. Not all symptoms will be related to hepatitis C, so it is important to discuss your concerns with your doctor.

Liver Function Tests (LFTs)

A number of blood tests that are used to monitor the ongoing condition of the liver are referred to as Liver Function Tests (LFTs). LFTs detect abnormal levels of enzyme production in the liver and the enzyme most commonly monitored using this test is the ALT level.

ALT (Alanine Aminotransferase) is the enzyme released when liver cells are damaged. Generally a normal ALT level is less than 40, an abnormal level is more than 40.

Liver Biopsy (if required)

A Liver Biopsy is the most accurate way to determine the state of the liver. A small sample of liver is taken with a needle and examined for fibrosis (scarring).

What Does Your Liver Do?

Your liver is part of your digestive system. It lies in the upper right hand side of your abdomen (well above your navel), and is mostly covered by your ribs.

Each day your liver does jobs like:

- ◇ breaking down foods into compounds that can be stored in your body, and later changed into glucose (sugar) to give you energy.
- ◇ making bile to help your body break down and absorb fats from the foods that you eat.
- ◇ storing glycogen (a starch that can be changed into sugar), some vitamins and minerals.
- ◇ breaking down poisonous substances or changing them into less harmful substances. (It has a very important role in getting rid of ammonia from your body's fluids.)
- ◇ making many of the substances that help your blood to clot and stop bleeding.
- ◇ storing and releasing iron when you need it.

