

> PREPARING FOR TESTING HEPATITIS C

Are you thinking of being tested for

Hepatitis C?



If you are thinking about being tested for hepatitis C, this booklet provides answers to these questions:

- ▶ What is hepatitis C?
- ▶ What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?
- ▶ Why get tested?
- ▶ Should I be tested?
- ▶ What is the test for hepatitis C?
- ▶ When will I get my test results?
- ▶ Who is notified of my test results?
- ▶ What if I'm infected with hepatitis C?
- ▶ Where can I get more information and support?

Discuss the information in this booklet with your doctor. You have the right to information to help you make choices about your health and wellbeing.

what is hepatitis c?



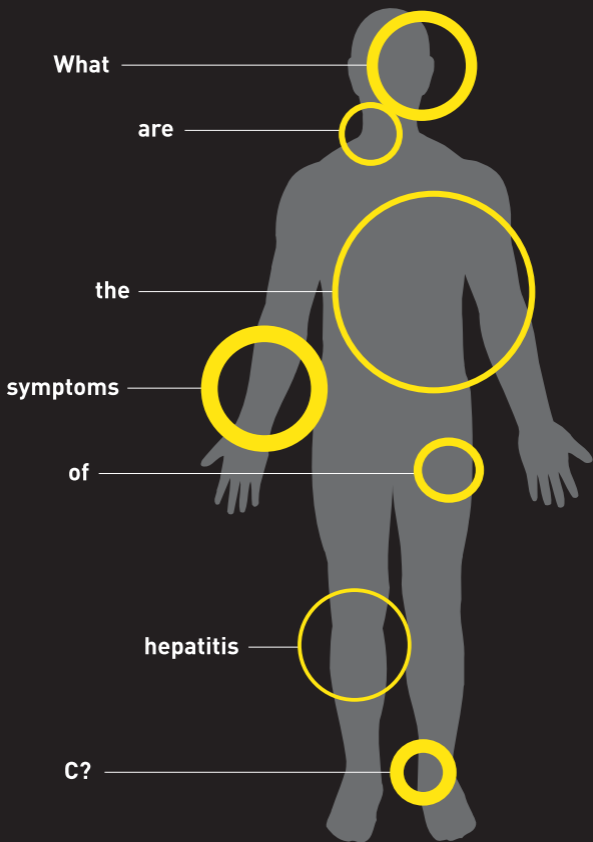
Hepatitis C is a virus found in blood and is only transmitted through blood-to-blood contact.

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Inflammation is a natural reaction of the body to injury, which often causes swelling and tenderness.

Hepatitis can be caused by a number of things including alcohol, chemicals, and viruses.

Hepatitis C, hepatitis B and hepatitis A are three different viruses that cause hepatitis. The only thing they have in common is that they can infect and inflame the liver.

Your liver is an important organ that helps you absorb nutrients from food. It produces and stores substances that your body needs, and breaks down waste products and harmful substances. It is located just behind the rib cage on your right hand side.



Few people notice any symptoms when they are first infected with hepatitis C. For those that do, symptoms are a bit like having the 'flu. Some people may have nausea, abdominal and back pain, and extreme tiredness. Jaundice is not a common symptom of infection with hepatitis C.

Most people do not experience any symptoms for the first ten years or more after their acute infection. Symptoms of chronic (longer than six months) infection can range from mild to severe. They can occur continuously or in bouts. The most common symptoms are fatigue or tiredness, lethargy, nausea and discomfort in the abdominal region, and feeling ill if you drink alcohol or eat fatty foods.

A human brain is centered against a bright yellow background with radiating lines. A white search bar with a dashed black border is overlaid on the brain. The text "Why get tested?" is written in black inside the search bar. A magnifying glass icon is positioned at the right end of the search bar.

Why get tested?

Testing for hepatitis C helps you make informed decisions about your health, lifestyle and treatment options.

If you find out you have hepatitis C, you can take steps to reduce its impact on your health and prevent harm to yourself and other people. For example, you can cut down on alcohol and eat foods that are good for your liver.



**Should I
Be Fested?**



It's your decision whether to be tested or not. Listed below are ways that hepatitis C is transmitted. If you think any of these apply to you, consider being tested for hepatitis C.

Shared drug-injecting equipment

If you have ever shared drug-injecting equipment, including syringes, needles, tourniquets, swabs, water, or spoons, you may have contracted hepatitis C. If you injected drugs for a long period, you may have contracted hepatitis C more than once.

Blood transfusions and blood products

Up to ten per cent of people with hepatitis C contracted the virus through blood transfusions or blood products prior to 1990. Since 1990 all blood has been screened for hepatitis C, and the introduction of new testing technology will further increase the safety of Australia's blood supply.

Tattoos, body piercing and skin penetration

A small number of people may have become infected through:

- ▶ unsterile tattooing or body piercing procedures;
- ▶ needle-stick injuries and accidental exposure to infected blood or blood products;
- ▶ some other form of blood-to-blood contact.

Sex

Hepatitis C is not commonly transmitted through sexual activity.

Pregnancy and childbirth

Research shows that the risk of transmission to your baby during pregnancy and childbirth is low, around five per cent.

Other ways of transmitting hepatitis C

Mass vaccination programs involving the reuse of needles and syringes may have resulted in the transmission of hepatitis C to some people. The risk of transmission of hepatitis C through unsterile medical procedures is now virtually eliminated in Australia, with the introduction of standard infection control procedures (these procedures assume that all blood and body fluids are contaminated).

WHAT IS THE TEST FOR HEPATITIS C?



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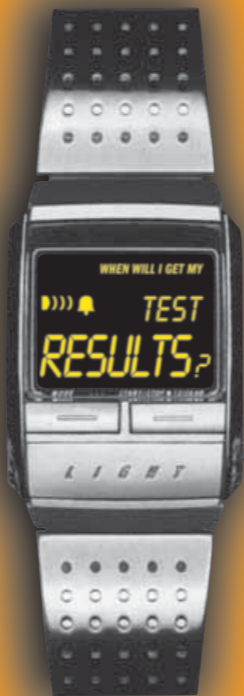
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The initial screening test for hepatitis C is called an **antibody test**. The human body produces antibodies in response to the virus. The antibody test looks for these antibodies, not for the virus itself, to work out if you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus.

It may take up to six months for antibodies to appear in your blood following infection. This is known as the “window period”. During this time antibody testing may not provide an accurate result.

A negative test result usually means that a person has not been infected with the virus. However, the blood sample may have been taken in the window period before antibodies can be detected.

A positive test result indicates you have been exposed to the virus at some point in time. About 25% of people who become infected with hepatitis C get rid of (or clear) the virus within 6 months. If people are



able to clear the virus they still keep their antibodies for some time.

A **Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR)** test can confirm whether the virus not just the antibodies to the virus are present. A PCR test can determine if a person has cleared the virus, the amount of virus (viral load) present in the blood and the strain (genotype) of hepatitis C a person has. PCR tests are useful when assessing someone for treatment.


There are also other tests that a doctor might suggest that are used to monitor the liver and assess people for treatment.

If you have decided to be tested, make an appointment with your doctor to receive the test results in person. Your doctor can explain the results, answer your questions, and recommend follow-up, if necessary.

WHO IS NOTIFIED OF MY TEST RESULTS?



If you test positive for hepatitis C, the laboratory that tests your blood is required by law to inform the health department. This information is only used for statistical purposes. Your personal details cannot be disclosed to anyone else.



What if I'm infected with hepatitis C?

Discovering that you have hepatitis C can be a frightening and numbing experience. People react differently to the news. You may feel angry, confused, depressed - or you may feel nothing at all. Not everyone feels the same when they are diagnosed, but everyone is affected emotionally one way or another.

> IT'S IMPORTANT TO REME

REMEMBER YOU ARE **NOT ALONE**



In each state and territory, you can get free information and support from:

- ▶ Hepatitis C Councils and/or support groups in all capital cities and some regional areas of Australia;
- ▶ haemophilia organisations for people with haemophilia;
- ▶ peer-based injecting drug user groups; and
- ▶ a range of community-based organisations or government agencies.

It can help to speak with other people who have hepatitis C, as they may understand how you are feeling. Speaking with a counsellor can be helpful too.

Where can I get more...

**INFORMATION
AND SUPPORT?**

More information:

For further information on hepatitis C or other topics featured in this publication please contact the Hepatitis Council in your state.

ACT Hepatitis C Council

Ph: (02) 6257 2911
Fax: (02) 6257 1611
HepLine: 1300 301 383
Email: info@acthepc.org
Web: www.acthepc.org

Hepatitis C Council of NSW

Ph: (02) 9332 1853
Fax: (02) 9332 1730
Hep C Helpline:
9332 1599 (Sydney callers)
1800 803 990 (NSW regional callers)
Email: hccnsw@hepatitisc.org.au
Web: www.hepatitisc.org.au

Hepatitis C Council of Victoria

Ph: (03) 9380 4644 (Melbourne callers)
1800 703 003 (VIC regional callers)
Fax: (03) 9380 4688
Email: info@hepcvic.org.au
Web: www.hepcvic.org.au

Hepatitis Council of WA

Ph: (08) 9227 9800
Fax: (08) 9227 6545
Information & Support Line:
(08) 9328 8538 (Perth callers)
1800 800 070 (WA regional callers)
Email: info@hepatitiswa.com.au
Web: www.hepatitiswa.com.au

Hepatitis Council of Queensland

Ph: (07) 3236 0610
Fax: (07) 3236 0614
Information Line:
(07) 3236 0612 (Brisbane callers)
1800 648 491
(QLD regional callers)
Email: reception@hepqld.asn.au
Web: www.hepatitisc.asn.au

Hepatitis C Council of SA

Ph: (08) 8362 8443
(Adelaide callers)
1800 021 133 (SA regional callers)
Fax: (08) 8362 8559
Email:
admin@hepcouncilsa.asn.au
Web: www.hepcouncilsa.asn.au

Tasmanian Council on AIDS, Hepatitis and Related Diseases

Ph: 03 6234 1242
Fax: 03 6234 1630
Information & Support Line:
1800 005 900
Email: mail@tascahrd.org.au
Web: www.tascahrd.org.au

NT AIDS and Hepatitis Council

Ph: (08) 8941 1711 (Darwin callers)
1800 880 899 (NT regional callers)
MensLine: 1800 181 888
Fax: (08) 8941 2590
Email: info@ntahc.org.au
Web: www.ntahc.org.au



Australian Hepatitis Council

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