

Checking it out

The only way to find out if you have hepatitis C is by a blood test. The hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibody test shows if you have ever been infected. It can take 3–6 months from the time of infection before this test becomes positive. So if your test result is negative, you will need a repeat test in 3–6 months' time.

The HCV antibody test can't show if you've developed a chronic infection. So if your test result is positive, you may need another test (HCV PCR test) to tell if the virus is still in your blood.

Ask your doctor or health care worker about hepatitis C testing.

If you already have hepatitis C...

You need to work with your doctor to look after yourself. Make sure you have a doctor you feel comfortable talking to and who has a good understanding of hepatitis C.

Highly effective treatments are now available for hepatitis C. These have cure rates of more than 90% after 8–24 weeks of treatment. Unlike previous treatments they involve tablets only (no injections) and have very few side-effects. To find out more, speak to your GP or contact Hepatitis WA.

A healthy diet, enough sleep, avoiding alcohol, tobacco and other drugs are also important. You are also responsible for not spreading hepatitis C to anyone else.

Even if you have chronic hepatitis C, you can still catch a different type of the hepatitis C virus. If you have been treated, you can catch hepatitis C again. You always need to protect yourself against hepatitis C.

You also need to minimise the risk of catching other liver infections, such as hepatitis A and hepatitis B. Ask your doctor about hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccination.

Where to go

Contact your GP or a doctor of your choice, local Population Health Unit, community nurse or health worker, or

HepatitisWA

Phone: 9328 8538 or 1800 800 070 toll-free

Sexual Health Helpline

Phone: 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 toll-free

You can find more information about hepatitis on the internet:

www.healthywa.wa.gov.au

www.hepatitiswa.com.au

www.hepatitisaustralia.com

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis



This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with disability.

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Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**

Hepatitis C



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What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. It can be caused by viruses such as hepatitis A, B, C, D, E and G, alcohol, some chemicals and drugs. Hepatitis C is a blood-borne infection.

Signs and symptoms

Many people don't have any symptoms at first, or have a minor, flu-like illness. In some cases, the person's urine becomes dark, and their skin and eyes turn yellow (jaundice).

Hepatitis symptoms can disappear within a few weeks but this does not always mean that the infection has also disappeared.

Around one in four people clear the virus from their body without treatment. For the remainder, the virus remains in their body – this is known as **chronic hepatitis C**.

Symptoms of chronic hepatitis C include:

- mild to severe tiredness
- loss of appetite
- feeling unwell and vomiting
- soreness under the ribs
- fever
- joint pain.

If you or your child develops these symptoms, see your doctor for a blood test.

How serious is hepatitis C?

About 8 out of every 10 people with hepatitis C develop a chronic infection. If not treated, around 1 in every 5 of these people will develop cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver so it can't work properly. Cirrhosis can take 20 years or more to develop. Some people with cirrhosis develop liver cancer.

People with chronic hepatitis C are infectious, so they can pass on the infection to others at any time by blood-to-blood contact.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne infection. It is passed on by blood-to-blood contact, when infected blood enters another person's bloodstream.

In Australia, most hepatitis C infections result from the sharing of needles and other equipment used for injecting drugs. You can get hepatitis C even from sharing needles or other equipment only once.

Other ways that you can get hepatitis C include:

- A needle-stick injury in a health care setting. The risk of getting hepatitis C from a needle found in a community setting, such as in the park, is very, very low.
- Getting any body art, such as tattooing or piercing, when the equipment isn't sterile.
- Having unprotected sex involving blood or damage to the skin, such as anal sex and/or unprotected sex with a woman during her period. The risk of infection through penile-vaginal sex at other times is very low.
- Sharing personal items that can have traces of blood on them, such as razors, toothbrushes and dental floss.
- There is a low risk of an infected mother passing on hepatitis C to her baby either during pregnancy, or at birth. There is almost no risk from breast milk. Breastfeeding is safe unless nipples are cracked or bleeding.

In Australia, you are very unlikely to get hepatitis C through blood transfusion or organ transplantation.

You can't get hepatitis C from everyday social contact, such as shaking hands, kissing, sharing a bathroom or toilet, or by donating blood.

Protecting yourself

There is no vaccine against hepatitis C. However, there are ways you can reduce the risk of getting hepatitis C:

- The best way to reduce the risk of getting hepatitis C is not to share needles. If you choose to inject drugs, always use your own new, sterile needles and syringes and sterile water. Also use your own spoon, swabs, filters, and tourniquets. You can get new needles and syringes from most chemists, needle and syringe exchange programs, and at country hospitals after-hours
- Use a condom or dam and lubricant, if there is a possibility of blood-to-blood contact during sex.
- Before considering any body art (such as tattooing or piercing) make sure the body artist uses only sterilised equipment, and new razors, inks, and needles each time.
- Don't share personal hygiene items, such as razors, toothbrushes and dental floss.
- Clean and cover any bleeding cuts and grazes immediately.
- Wear gloves and use paper towels (or disposable cloths) when cleaning up blood spills. Wash the area with soapy water, then bleach. Put the towels and gloves in a plastic bag before putting them in the bin.
- Health care workers should always use infection control procedures at work.