

Hepatitis



Could I be at risk?

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What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that can damage the liver and can lead to years of ill health. Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine to protect against the hepatitis C virus (HCV).

How could I get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is carried in the blood and can be found in some other body fluids. But blood (even in tiny or invisible amounts) is the main source of infection. The virus is spread mainly by the blood of an infected person entering another person's bloodstream. You can't catch it through everyday contact such as holding hands, hugging or kissing, or through sharing toilets, crockery or kitchen utensils.

Hepatitis C is passed on by:

- sharing equipment for injecting drugs, even if you did this only once or twice, or a long time ago. Needles and syringes are the greatest risk, but spoons, filters or straws for inhaling cocaine could also carry infection, as could water;

- receiving a blood transfusion (before September 1991), or blood products like clotting factors used to treat haemophilia (before 1986). All blood used in Northern Ireland is now screened for hepatitis C.

Less commonly, hepatitis C can be passed on by:

- a hepatitis C positive mother to her baby, before or during birth;
- unprotected sex (without a condom) with someone who has the virus;
- medical and dental treatment abroad where hepatitis C is common and where equipment may not be sterilised properly;
- tattooing, ear piercing, body piercing or acupuncture with equipment that is not sterile;
- sharing razors or toothbrushes contaminated with blood from someone who has the virus.

See your GP or nurse if you think you could have been in contact with the virus in any of these ways.

What are the symptoms?

Many people who have the hepatitis C virus have no signs or symptoms at all – for years or even decades. But even without symptoms you can still pass the virus on to others.

Symptoms, though not common, may include one or more of the following:

- mild flu-like illness;
- mild to severe fatigue;
- nausea or loss of appetite;
- weight loss;
- depression or anxiety;
- pain in the area of the liver (right side of the stomach);
- mild jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of eyes);
- itchy skin;
- joint pains;
- poor memory or concentration;
- alcohol intolerance.

How might the virus affect me in the long term?

Around one in five people who become infected with hepatitis C will recover completely without treatment. However, most people who become infected remain so for a very long time. This may affect them in different ways:

- some people can remain well throughout their life;
- some people experience a range of symptoms (see [What are the symptoms?](#) on page 5);
- about one in five people will develop severe liver damage (cirrhosis) after about 20 years;
- in some people, cirrhosis can lead to liver cancer or complete liver failure.

How do I know if I have the virus?

If you think you could have been in contact with the hepatitis C virus at any time in the past, you can have a simple blood test to find out if you may have been infected.

Where can I get a test?

Your GP will be able to carry out tests for hepatitis C. Local drug treatment services and sexual health/Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinics may also offer testing. (See page 11 of [Information and support](#) for details on how to contact these services.)

What if the test result is negative?

This probably means that you have never been in contact with the hepatitis C virus. However, it can take up to six months for your body to react to the virus, so the test result may be negative if you have been infected recently. Your GP may advise you to have a second test.

What if the test result is positive?

A blood test will tell you whether you have been infected with the virus at any stage in the past. It will not tell you if you still have it.

You can be referred to a specialist to see if you still have the virus and how it is affecting your liver.

Is treatment available?

Treatment for hepatitis C is available and is improving all the time. Drug therapy is available that can cure the infection in about half of the people treated. Your GP and specialist will discuss which treatment is most appropriate for you.

How can I help myself if I have the virus?

If you drink alcohol, the most important thing you can do to minimise damage to your liver is to limit the amount of alcohol you drink or better still to cut out alcohol altogether.

How can I avoid becoming infected or passing on the virus to others?

- Avoid any direct contact with other people's blood.
- Avoid sharing any toiletry equipment that could have been contaminated with blood, eg razors, toothbrushes, nail scissors, tweezers.

- If you or your sexual partner have hepatitis C, there is a small risk that it could be passed on during sex. Condoms minimise the risk. Using condoms will also help to protect you against unwanted pregnancy, HIV and many other sexually transmitted infections.
- If you are considering having ear piercing, body piercing, a tattoo or acupuncture, check that equipment such as needles and ink pots are not being re-used and are sterile.
- If you inject drugs, NEVER share or pass on drug injecting equipment. This includes needles, syringes, spoons, water, filters or anything else that might be contaminated with blood. Contact the National Drugs Helpline for details of drug services in your area and safer injecting advice – 0800 77 66 00.

Information and support

If you have any questions, you can talk to your GP or nurse.

- **Hepatitis C information line** is for anyone with concerns about hepatitis C.
Tel: 0800 451 451 (10am-10pm, 7 days a week)
Textphone: 0800 085 0859 (10am-10pm, 7 days a week)
- **UK Hepatitis C Resource Centre** offers an easily accessible advice and information point for anyone seeking information on hepatitis C.
195 New Kent Road, London SE1 4AG
Tel: 020 7378 5495
Information line: 0870 242 2467 (10am-4pm, Mon-Fri)
Email: info@hepccentre.org.uk
Website: www.hepccentre.org.uk
- **British Liver Trust (BLT)** provides information on all forms of liver disease. *Hepatitis C* and *Injecting drug use and hepatitis C* are leaflets available from its website or by sending a SAE to:
2 Southampton Road, Ringwood BH24 1HY
Tel: 0870 770 8028
Email: info@britishlivertrust.org.uk
Website: www.britishlivertrust.org.uk
- **The Haemophilia Society** provides information and support for people living with or affected by haemophilia who are concerned about hepatitis C.
First Floor, Petersham House
57a Hatton Garden, London EC1N 8JG
Tel: 020 7831 1020
Freephone helpline: 0800 018 6068 (10am-4pm, Mon-Fri)
Email: info@haemophilia.org.uk
Website: www.haemophilia.org.uk

- **Children's Liver Disease Foundation** specialises in supporting children with liver disease.
36 Great Charles Street, Birmingham B3 3YJ
Tel: 0121 212 3839
Email: info@childliverdisease.org
Website: www.childliverdisease.org
- **RVH Liver Support Group** is an independent group offering help and support to those with liver disease and their carers throughout Northern Ireland. The group is affiliated to the British Liver Trust. Contact: Gordon Cave.
Tel: 07737 718493
Website: www.rvhiversupportgroup.co.uk
- **National Drugs Helpline** provides confidential information and advice to drug users and anyone concerned about drugs.
Tel: 0800 77 66 00
- **www.drugsalcohol.info** gives a list of the drugs and alcohol treatment services throughout Northern Ireland.
- You can also contact your local **sexual health/Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinic** for free, confidential advice. An appointment is necessary in Belfast and Londonderry.
Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast:
Tel: 028 9063 4050 / 028 9063 4054
Causeway Hospital, Coleraine:
Tel: 028 7034 6028
Daisy Hill Hospital, Newry:
Tel: 028 3083 5050
Altnagelvin Hospital, Londonderry:
Tel: 028 7161 1269

For more information, visit the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety website, www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/phealth or the NHS hepatitis C website, www.hepc.nhs.uk

This leaflet is also available as PDF files in other languages from:

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/phealth

www.healthpromotionagency.org.uk



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