

Hepatitis C

Could I be at risk?



Contents

Page no

What is hepatitis C?	3
How could I get hepatitis C?	3
Will I have symptoms?	5
How do I know if I have the virus?	5
Where can I get a test?	5
What if the test result is negative?	6
What if the test result is positive?	6
How might the virus affect me in the long term?	6
Is treatment available?	7
How can I help myself if I have the virus?	7
How can I avoid becoming infected or passing on the virus to others?	8
Information and support	9

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. 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, including image and performance enhancing drugs like anabolic steroids and tanning products, 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 the water used for mixing or preparing the drugs.

- 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;
- living in countries where hepatitis C is more common. There is an increased risk of it being passed on through medical and dental procedures 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.

Will I have 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.

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. Sexual health/Genito Urinary Medicine (GUM) clinics also offer testing. See [Information and support](#) on page 9 for details on how to contact these services.

What if the test result is negative?

This means you have probably 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 in this case.

What if the test result is positive?

A positive test means you have been infected with hepatitis C at some stage in the past and may still be infected with the virus. You can be referred to a specialist to see how it is affecting your liver.

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 remain well throughout their lives;

- some people experience a range of symptoms;
- 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.

Is treatment available?

Treatment for hepatitis C is available and improving all the time. Drug therapy is available, which can cure the infection in about 80–90% of people treated, depending on the genotype of the virus and other factors. 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 limit the amount of alcohol you drink or, better still, cut out alcohol altogether.

You should get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B, the annual flu, and pneumococcal infection.

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 has hepatitis C, there is a small risk that it could be passed on during sex. Condoms minimise the risk. Using condoms will also help protect you against unwanted pregnancy, HIV and many other sexually transmitted infections.
- If you are considering 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.

Information and support

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

Sexual health/Genitourinary Medicine (GUM) clinics provide free, confidential advice. Please visit www.sexualhealthni.info/gum-clinics-northern-ireland for times and contact details of your local sexual health/GUM clinic.

- **www.publichealth.hscni.net** provides information on drug and alcohol treatment services throughout Northern Ireland.
- **British Liver Trust (BLT)** provides information on all forms of liver disease.
Helpline: 014 2548 1320 (9am–5pm, Mon–Fri)
www.britishlivertrust.org.uk
- **Hepatitis C Trust** provides information and support for people with hepatitis C.
Tel: 020 7089 6221 (10.30am–4.30pm, Mon–Fri)
www.hepctrust.org.uk

- **RVH Liver Support Group** offers support to those in Northern Ireland living with liver disease and is an independent group affiliated to the British Liver Trust.
Tel: 077 3771 8493
www.rvhliversupportgroup.org
- **Northern Ireland Hepatitis B and C Managed Clinical Network** provides information on hepatitis C.
www.hepbandcni.net
- **Public Health Agency**
www.publichealth.hscni.net

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

www.publichealth.hscni.net

and www.hepbandcni.net



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