

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver caused by one of many hepatitis viruses. In British Columbia, the most common types are hepatitis A, B and C. Hepatitis C is only passed through contact with blood.

Hepatitis C is the most common form of viral hepatitis infection reported in BC.

Some people clear hepatitis C from their body, meaning the virus goes away on its own. Most people will not clear the virus and hepatitis C can become a long-term (chronic) condition. However, hepatitis C can be managed and usually cured with anti-viral medications.

Causes

Hepatitis C is passed through blood-to-blood contact. It is most often passed by:

- Sharing drug equipment such as needles, syringes and pipes.
- Blood or blood product transfusions in a country where the blood supply is not tested for hepatitis C. In Canada, this applies only to transfusions before 1992. As of June 1992, all blood and blood products in Canada have been screened for hepatitis C.
- Tattoos, body-piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis if the equipment is not sterile.
- Sexual contact where blood is exchanged, especially when a person has a sexually transmitted infection or is living with HIV.

Hepatitis C is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food or drinks.

If you have hepatitis C, you can pass it to others even if you don't have symptoms.

Symptoms

If you have hepatitis C, it is common to not notice any symptoms. If you do have symptoms, they will most likely show up 6 to 7 weeks after contact. The most common symptoms include:

- fever
- feeling tired
- muscle pain
- loss of appetite and nausea
- stomach pain
- jaundice (yellowing of the skin or eyes)

Tests and Diagnosis

Testing for hepatitis C is usually done with a blood sample. It is best to get tested for hepatitis C if you:

- have symptoms
- have a sexual partner you have anal sex with who has tested positive for hepatitis C
- have shared drug equipment

Window Period (how long to wait before testing):

Most test results are accurate 5 to 10 weeks after you come into contact with hepatitis C. In British Columbia, most test results should be ready in 10 days.

Treatment

Hepatitis C is treated and usually cured with anti-viral medications. If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C, you should have a check-up with your health care provider every 6 to 12 months. Even if you have no symptoms, hepatitis C can still be damaging your liver.

If you have hepatitis C, you may want more information or to talk to others who also have the infection. The Pacific Hepatitis C Network can connect you with resources and local support groups in your area.

Complications

Hepatitis C infection can lead to serious complications, including:

- cirrhosis
- liver cancer
- the need for a liver transplant

Pregnancy: Tell your health care provider if you are pregnant and have hepatitis C. You can pass hepatitis C to your child during birth. Breast/chest-feeding is usually still encouraged, but talk to your health care provider.

Prevention

Currently there is no vaccine for hepatitis C. If you have hepatitis C, you should be vaccinated against hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and pneumococcal disease. These vaccines should be free from your local health unit or family doctor.

To prevent hepatitis C, you can:

- use condoms
- do not share drug equipment, such as needles

- use new drug equipment every time you use drugs
- use new supplies for tattoos and body piercings
- do not share toothbrushes, razors, or any other household products that may have blood on them

It is a good idea to get tested regularly for STIs, especially if you have new partners or open relationships. Talking with partners about safer sex makes sure everyone knows what to expect. Condoms are great if they work for you – the correct use of condoms can reduce your chances of getting and passing hepatitis C.

Resources

HealthLink BC – Information on Hepatitis C in multiple languages
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hepatitis-c-virus>

HealthLink BC – Information on living well with hepatitis C
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/living-well-hepatitis-c-virus>

CATIE – Information on hepatitis C
<https://www.catie.ca/en/hepatitis-c>

Hepatitis C Passport – A pocket-sized booklet for people living with hepatitis C where they can monitor test results over time (by CATIE)
<http://www.catie.ca/en/resources/hep-c-passport>

Hepatitis C Basics – Information about hepatitis C testing and treatment (by CATIE)
<http://www.catie.ca/en/basics/hepatitis-c>

Hepatitis C Treatment Basics – Basic information about current hepatitis C treatments (by CATIE)
<http://www.catie.ca/en/basics/hepatitis-c-treatment-basics>

Hepatitis Education Canada – Information and resources on hepatitis C (by the University of British Columbia)
<http://hepatitiseducation.med.ubc.ca/>

Pacific Hepatitis Network – Information, resources and support on hepatitis C
<http://www.pacifichepc.org/>

Help 4 Hep BC – Peer-to-peer helpline for people diagnosed with hepatitis C, provided by the Pacific Hepatitis Network (1-888-411-7578)
<http://www.help4hepbc.ca/>

SmartSexResource – If you are worried or have anxiety about hepatitis C
<https://smartsexresource.com/topics/worry-and-anxiety>

TransCareBC – Gender-affirming sexual and reproductive health information
<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/care-support/access-care/sexual-hlth>