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Hepatitis C virus

What is hepatitis C virus?

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a curable viral infection that inflames the liver. If left untreated, it can progress to chronic liver disease, cirrhosis, liver cancer and even death.

How is hepatitis C virus spread?

HCV is spread primarily through blood-to-blood contact. The main ways of passing HCV are:

- Sharing drug injection equipment such as needles, syringes, straws and pipes
- Sharing unsterilized materials or equipment used for tattoos, body-piercing, acupuncture or electrolysis
- Blood or blood product transfusions, or organ transplant in countries where the blood supply is not tested for hepatitis C. In Canada, this applies to blood and blood products received before 1992
- Condomless or rough sex, especially if there is contact with blood, such as in the presence of menstrual blood, open sores, cuts or wounds, or bodily fluid containing blood

Other less common ways HCV is spread include:

- Sharing personal care items, such as toothbrushes, dental floss, razors, nail files or other items which could have tiny amounts of blood on them
- From a pregnant person to their baby, during pregnancy or birth

What are the symptoms?

Most people who have HCV feel well, have no symptoms and may not know they have HCV. Some people may have a brief illness with symptoms around 6 weeks after being infected with HCV. You can clear HCV and still become infected again in the future.

The most common symptoms of acute HCV may include:

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Stomach pain
- Joint pain
- Dark urine
- Pale stools
- Nausea and vomiting
- Jaundice (yellow skin or eyes)

About 75% of people living with HCV will develop chronic (lifelong) HCV. Some people with chronic HCV will develop significant liver disease. This can lead to scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), kidney disease, type 2 diabetes, liver failure, liver cancer or the need for a liver transplant.

How do I know if I have hepatitis C?

You can have hepatitis C for many years without having symptoms or feeling sick. The only way to know if you have hepatitis C is through a blood test. A positive HCV antibody test means that you have or had hepatitis C. If your antibody test is positive, you need a ribonucleic acid (RNA) test to confirm if you currently have HCV.

How is hepatitis C virus not spread?

Hepatitis C is not passed through breast milk, casual contact such as hugging, kissing, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food or drinks.

It is safe for a person with HCV to breast or chestfeed their infant, unless the nipple or areola is cracked or bleeding.

How can I prevent getting or passing HCV?

There is no vaccine available for HCV.

To prevent hepatitis C transmission, you can:

- Get tested if you engaged in any behavior that increases the risk for HCV transmission in the last 12 months since your last test
- Talk to your partner(s) about safer sex and being tested for sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBI)
- Use condoms and learn about the correct use of condoms
- Do not share drug equipment. Use new and sterile equipment for each person
- Do not share personal care items that may have blood on them

What should I do if I prick myself with a used needle?

Follow these steps:

1. If possible, keep the wounded area lower than your heart to promote bleeding
2. Wash the area well with soap and water
3. Go to the nearest hospital emergency department immediately for care

Is hepatitis C virus curable?

Yes. Hepatitis C is curable. Highly effective, direct-acting antiviral treatments (DAAs) are available through BC PharmaCare to all British Columbians living with HCV.

DAAs can cure more than 95% of people with HCV. DAAs are well-tolerated with few side effects and are easier to take than older medications (no injections). In 8 to 12 weeks, most patients are cured of HCV.

If you have chronic HCV, you should see your health care provider regularly. During these visits, you may have physical exams and other tests to help see how your liver is functioning.

You may also be referred to a specialist for further testing. Early treatment can prevent the infection from becoming a very serious liver disease.

To further prevent liver disease, you should stop alcohol use and take steps to avoid getting other infections that could affect the liver (for example, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B and hepatitis A).

If I have hepatitis C, should I get vaccines for other diseases?

Yes. You can also become infected with other types of hepatitis virus if you have hepatitis C. If you are living with hepatitis C, you should be immunized against hepatitis A, hepatitis B, pneumococcal disease and influenza. If you have HCV, you receive these vaccines for free from your local public health unit or health care provider.

For more information

See the following HealthLinkBC files for more information:

- HealthLinkBC File #12d Inactivated influenza (flu) vaccine
- HealthLinkBC File #25a Hepatitis B vaccine
- HealthLinkBC File #33 Hepatitis A vaccine
- HealthLinkBC File #40b Living well with Hepatitis C virus
- HealthLinkBC File #62b Pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine

For more information on hepatitis C:

- Hepatitis Education Canada
- SmartSex Resource – Hepatitis C
- CATIE – Hepatitis C Basics
- Government of Canada – Hepatitis C: Prevention and risks

For more information on who should be tested for HCV visit Hepatitis C: have you been tested?

BC Centre for Disease Control
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