

# Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis viruses are the most common cause of hepatitis (viral hepatitis), and there are 5 main hepatitis viruses. In British Columbia, the most common types are hepatitis A, B and C.

Hepatitis C is only passed through contact with someone else's blood. Hepatitis C is the most common form of viral hepatitis infection reported in BC.

Some people clear hepatitis C from their body, which means the virus goes away on its own. Most people will not clear the virus and hepatitis C can become a long-term (chronic) condition without treatment. 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 passed through exchange of genital fluids or by casual contact such as hugging, kissing, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food or drinks.

People living with chronic hepatitis C infection can pass it to others even if they don't have symptoms.

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

## 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 with anti-viral medications. The medications are tablets taken by mouth for 8-12 weeks. More than 95% of people who complete treatment clear the infection.

Medications prescribed for hepatitis C treatment are free or partially covered for people with government or private insurance. Patient support programs are also available to help cover costs if there are any.

If you have been diagnosed with chronic hepatitis C infection, you should see a health care provider to check the health of your liver. They can also offer and help you plan for treatment. Even if you have no symptoms, hepatitis C can still cause damage to your liver and other organs such as your kidneys. Treatment can prevent new or worsening

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organ damage, so getting treatment earlier can help protect your health. If you do not get treatment, a health care provider should check the health of your liver every 6-12 months.

People affected by hepatitis C may want more information or to talk to others who are also affected. [BC Hepatitis Network](#) can connect you with resources and local support groups in your area.

## Complications

Hepatitis C infection can lead to serious complications, including:

- cirrhosis
- kidney disease
- type 2 diabetes
- 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. You can clear Hepatitis C infection and still become infected again in the future. You can also become infected with other types of hepatitis virus if you have Hepatitis C. If you are living with hepatitis C infection, 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 transmission, you can:

- get tested for hepatitis C if you have engaged in any behaviour that is a risk for hepatitis C transmission in the last 12 months since you were previously tested
- use condoms
- do not share drug equipment, such as needles, spoon or drug mixes
- 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

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It is a good idea to get tested regularly for STIs, especially if you have new or casual partners. Talking with partners about safer sex makes sure everyone knows what to expect. The correct use of condoms can also 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-infection>

### **HealthLink BC – Information on living well with hepatitis C**

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/living-well-hepatitis-c-virus-infection>

### **CATIE – Information on hepatitis C**

<https://www.catie.ca/hepatitis-c>

### **Hepatitis C Treatment Basics – Basic information about current hepatitis C treatments (by CATIE)**

<https://www.catie.ca/hepatitis-c-an-in-depth-guide/hepatitis-c-treatment>

### **BC Hepatitis Clinics Map - Directory with information about clinics across BC that provide hepatitis C testing, treatment, monitoring and follow-up care**

<http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/prevention-public-health/bc-hepatitis-clinics>

### **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>