

Don't be afraid to ask Commonly asked questions about hepatitis C

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C (or hep C) is a virus found in blood that can cause inflammation of the liver and possibly liver disease. There is no vaccine to prevent hep C.

Is hepatitis C the same as hepatitis A (hep A) and hepatitis B (hep B)?

No. Hep A and hep B are two different viruses that can also damage the liver, but the way they are transmitted, and the course of the disease, are different. A vaccine is available to prevent hep A and hep B. It is possible to have different types of hepatitis at the same time and this can worsen the damage to the liver.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Many people do not notice any symptoms for many years. Some people have no symptoms until the liver is seriously damaged. Other people however, may experience: constant tiredness, discomfort in the liver area, and feeling sick after drinking alcohol or eating fatty foods.

How do you get hepatitis C?

The hep C virus is spread when infected blood from one person enters the blood stream of another person. Even invisible amounts of blood can transmit hep C. You can get hep C by:

High Risk

- Re-using someone else's injecting equipment – this is the way hep C is most commonly spread in Australia.
- Unsterile medical procedures or vaccinations. In some countries this is the way hep C has most commonly spread. Vaccinations and medical procedures in Australia are safe, as sterile equipment is used.

Medium Risk

- Unsterile tattooing or body piercing procedures.
- Needle-stick injuries and accidental exposure to infected blood.
- Re-using someone else's personal items that may have blood on them, such as razors, nail clippers, and toothbrushes.

Low Risk

- Mother to child during childbirth.
- Blood-to-blood contact during sex.

Hep C is NOT spread through casual contact, swimming pools or toilets. It is NOT spread by coughing, kissing, sneezing, hugging, sharing eating utensils and drinking glasses, or insect bites.

How do I know if I have hepatitis C?

The only way to find out if you have been exposed to the hep C virus (or hep A or hep B) is to have a blood test.

Where can you have a hepatitis C test?

You can get tested by your doctor or at other health services. If you go to a sexual health clinic you can have a free and anonymous test, you do not need to have a Medicare card.

Who should have the hepatitis C test?

There are good reasons for having a hep C test, if any of the following apply:

- you have ever injected drugs (including steroids) with other people (even just once).
- you have assisted someone to inject drugs (including steroids).
- you have been in prison and engaged in unsafe injecting, body piercing, or tattooing practices.
- you are not sure your tattoo or body piercing was done safely.
- you had a blood transfusion in Australia before February 1990.
- you have had a medical procedure or vaccination in other countries, and you are not sure if it was done safely.
- You have ever experienced blood-to-blood contact during sex with a partner whose hep C status you are not sure of.

What if I test positive?

If you test positive, it means you have been exposed to the hep C virus. You might consider:

- o seeing a doctor regularly.
- o Informing yourself about services and support options available by, for instance, contacting the Hepatitis C Council of NSW.
- o adopting a healthier diet, reducing your intake of alcohol and other drugs, and not taking any medicines without consulting your doctor or pharmacist.
- o getting vaccinated against hep A and B.
- o learning how to prevent spreading the virus to others.
- o keeping up to date with hep C information.

What about discrimination and confidentiality?

Commonwealth and NSW laws make discrimination based on hep C status unlawful, but there are a number of exceptions. For example, if you have hep C you may not be able to do certain specialised medical work called exposure prone procedures.

Health service providers should not discuss your situation, or what you tell them, with anyone else, without your permission. If you have hep C, legally you do not have to tell anyone about your status, except if you are applying for life insurance, if you are a health care worker who performs exposure prone procedures, and if you donate blood. It is your decision who to tell, why and how.

Is there any treatment for hepatitis C?

Yes. Treatment is available and can eradicate the virus. There are certain criteria to qualify for treatment, and there can be some side effects involved. Treatment options continue to improve. You can get updated information about treatment from the Hepatitis C Council.

How can I avoid hepatitis C?

You can prevent the transmission of hep C by:

- o not sharing or re-using injecting equipment, including needles, syringes, spoons, filters, water and tourniquets. Use only your own sterile injecting equipment and always dispose of it safely. Remember to wash your hands before and after injecting.
- o only getting tattoos and other body piercing done by professionals using sterile equipment.
- o using your own razors, nail clippers, and toothbrushes.
- o use protection in sexual activities that involve blood-to-blood contact.

What is harm minimisation?

Harm minimisation is a key element in Australia's response to HIV and hepatitis C. The objective of harm minimisation is to reduce the transmission of disease and subsequent illness, as well as reduce the personal and social impact and loss of quality of life caused by those diseases and illnesses.

Needle and Syringe Programs (NSP) have been a key strategy to reduce harm from injecting drug use in Australia. Since 1987, free injecting equipment has been made available to people who inject drugs. NSPs provide health education to people who inject drugs, sterile injecting equipment, disposal facilities, and some will provide needles for tattoos. Despite evidence that NSP have been successful in preventing HIV and hep C transmissions among people who inject drugs, saving the Australian community billions of dollars in cost for treatment of these diseases¹, NSP remain controversial.

How to get more information?

Contact the Hepatitis C Council of NSW on (02) 9332 1599 (Sydney callers) or 1800 803 990 (other NSW callers). Website: www.hepatitisc.org.au.

If you want to use a language other than English, you can use the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS) - 131 450 - and have them call the service for you. You can call TIS for the cost of a local call.

For multilingual information on hepatitis C go to: www.multiculturalhivhepc.net.

¹ Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. (2002). Return on investment in needle & syringe programs in Australia. Canberra: Publications Production Unit.