

# Hepatitis C

## Fact Sheet

### What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease caused by the Hepatitis C virus, which is spread between people by blood-to-blood contact. It is a serious disease that causes your liver to become inflamed. Some people have long-lasting effects, which can lead to liver disease (including cirrhosis), liver cancer and death.

Hepatitis A, B and C are all different diseases, so they have different symptoms and different treatments. The Hepatitis B vaccine does not protect you from Hepatitis A or Hepatitis C.

### How did I acquire Hepatitis C virus?

The Hepatitis C virus is spread when blood of an infected person enters the blood stream of an uninfected person. The amount of blood might be so small that it's invisible to the eye. This can occur:

- From transfusions of infected blood or blood products
- When the skin is pierced with contaminated equipment, including:
  - Shared drug injecting equipment (needles, syringes and other equipment for injecting drugs and drug solutions)
  - Needlestick injuries
  - Unsafe injections, tattoos, body piercing, acupuncture and other procedures that involve unsterile body cutting or piercing
- By sharing personal items that may have blood on them such as toothbrushes, razors, sex toys
- When blood from an infected person makes direct contact with an open wound of another person

Rarely, Hepatitis C may also be transmitted:

- From mother to child during pregnancy or childbirth
- During sex without a condom, particularly in people with HIV infection

Hepatitis C is NOT transmitted by casual contact such as hugging, or holding hands, kissing on the cheek, coughing, or sneezing, sharing food,

sharing eating utensils, or eating food prepared by someone with Hepatitis C.

### Who is at risk from Hepatitis C infections?

In Australia, people who may have Hepatitis C are those who:

- Inject drugs, or have injected drugs in the past
- Have been in prison
- Had a blood transfusion in Australia before February 1990, or more recently in another country
- Have a mother with Hepatitis C infection
- Have a sexual partner with Hepatitis C infection and are HIV positive
- Are on haemodialysis
- Were born in, or have had medical procedures in a country with a high prevalence of Hepatitis C
- Have had a tattoo or body piercing done by someone with poor infection control practices
- Have had other blood to blood contact with another person.

### Can Hepatitis C be prevented?

There is no vaccination to prevent against Hepatitis C. Hepatitis C prevention requires preventing exposure to blood that may contain Hepatitis C.

The best ways to prevent Hepatitis C infection is to avoid any possible blood-to-blood contact by:

- Never sharing needles, syringes, and other injecting equipment
- Ensuring tattoo, acupuncture and body piercing equipment is sterile
- Only undergoing surgical, podiatry or dental procedures with practitioners registered with the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency (or overseas equivalent)
- Preventing contact with other people's body fluids (e.g., use gloves to dress wounds and to clean up spill of blood and body fluids)

# Hepatitis C

## Fact Sheet

- Always use condoms during sex if blood may be present
- Never sharing personal items such as razors, toothbrushes, combs, and nail clippers

Sterile needles and syringes can be obtained from your local needle and syringe program. These are free, anonymous, and confidential services. You can also get sterile needles and syringes from some pharmacies.

### How will my care change whilst in hospital?

- Regular and thorough hand hygiene is one of the most successful ways to prevent the spread of **ALL** infections.
- The hospital staff will wear protective apparel such as gloves and an apron or gown when they anticipate contact with blood and/or bodily fluids

### Good Hand Hygiene Practices

Hand Hygiene is the most effective way to prevent **ALL** infections, including the flu and the common cold. Encourage your family and friends to learn and maintain good hand hygiene practices every day.

Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the Infection Prevention and Control team.

### Alternative - Alcohol based hand rub/gel

During your stay in hospital, you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based hand rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled/dirty. There is a variety of brands on the market and available for purchase at most pharmacies. You may choose to use this type of product at home.

### Can I still have visitors?

Yes – you can still have visitors. **Casual contact such as hugging and kissing is OK.** If a friend or relative has had recent surgery, currently have an illness, or has a compromised immune system they may wish to contact the Infection Prevention and Control team or speak with their GP for further advice. We ask that you also encourage your visitors to perform hand hygiene before and after they enter your room. They can use either soap and water at the wall sink in the ward, or the alcohol-based hand rub provided outside your room.

### What happens when I get home?

- It is important that anyone assisting you with close personal care wears gloves if they are going to be in contact with any wounds, blood, urine, or faeces. They must wash their hands well, after removing their gloves and disposing of the gloves immediately in the rubbish bin
- If you have Hepatitis C it is important to tell people who may have been exposed, so that they can get tested. Your doctor or sexual health clinic can help you identify people who may be at risk and help contact them. If you wish, your doctor can make the contact for you, while also keeping your identity confidential

### What is the public health response?

Doctors, hospitals, and laboratories must notify new cases of Viral Hepatitis to the local Public Health Unit. This information is kept confidential and is used to control further spread and better understand who is at risk of the disease.

# Hepatitis C

## Fact Sheet

### Where can I get further information?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Prevention and Control team, ask your nurse to contact the Infection Prevention and Control Office. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Our contact numbers are (02) 9480 9433 or (02) 9480 9732.

### Alternatively,

- **Contact the Local Public Health Unit 1300 066 055**
- **Contact the Hepatitis Infoline (02) 9332 1599 or 1800 803 990 (outside Sydney)**
- **NSW Sexual Health Infoline 1800 451 624**

### References

NSW Dept of Health; Communicable Diseases Factsheets – Hepatitis C (26 August 2019)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); Viral Hepatitis – Hepatitis C Information (Patient Education Resources) (April 9, 2020)

Hepatitis Australia; Hepatitis Information – Hepatitis C (3 September 2020)

<https://www.hepatitisaustralia.com/what-is-hepatitis-c>

National Health and Medical Research Council; Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare (2019)

NSW Dept of Health; Infection Prevention and Control Policy PD2017\_013