



Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C infection is caused by a virus which is carried in the blood and infects the liver. A blood test for hepatitis C has only been available since 1990; many people who test positive for hepatitis C were infected before this. Before specific testing was available, the condition was known as 'non-A non-B hepatitis'.

There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.

Transmission

Hepatitis C is spread by contact with infected blood.

This means that injecting drug use may spread the infection. Other common methods of transmission are tattoos, body piercing and acupuncture. Some people with hepatitis C were infected through blood transfusions before testing began.

Hepatitis C is not easily spread by sexual contact. However, there may be increased risk during menstruation or during anal intercourse without a condom.

Sometimes hepatitis C infection may be transmitted from mother to baby.

Household spread of hepatitis C is not common, but shared razors and toothbrushes may transmit blood (and hepatitis C).

The risk of transmission may be higher when a person has acute hepatitis C infection.

After being infected:

- the virus may clear from your body
- you may become a healthy carrier
- you may get chronic hepatitis, which can cause liver damage.

Acute hepatitis C

Most hepatitis C infections do not cause symptoms.

However, acute hepatitis C occurs in a few people soon after they become infected. It is usually a short illness with jaundice (skin and eyes turn yellow), nausea and a general feeling of being unwell.

Most people recover completely from this illness, but the hepatitis C virus may remain in the body for life.

Chronic hepatitis C

Most people with chronic hepatitis C infection have mild damage to their liver.

Many have no symptoms. Others have mild symptoms, such as abdominal discomfort, feeling tired or occasional nausea.

In some people, symptoms are more severe, and the virus may cause scarring (cirrhosis) of the liver. This seems to be more common when another cause of liver damage is also present (eg alcohol, hepatitis B, hepatitis A). Cirrhosis usually develops many years after the initial infection with hepatitis C.

Treatment

Treatment is available for some people with chronic hepatitis C. There are side effects and the treatment is not effective in all cases; you should discuss this with your doctor.

Blood tests are used to check the liver regularly. If these liver function tests are persistently abnormal, it indicates that the liver has been damaged and you may be referred to a specialist for treatment.

Who should be tested for hepatitis C?

People who have:

- injected drugs
- received a blood transfusion or blood products before 1990
- tattoos (particularly if applied before 1985, or if not applied professionally, or if applied in gaol)
- had unprotected anal sex.

Anyone with a specific concern should discuss having a test with their doctor.

If a hepatitis C test is positive

A positive result for the **hepatitis C antibody test** means you have been infected with hepatitis C virus—now or in the past. Most people who test positive for the hepatitis C antibody still have the virus present in their body. The antibody test does not confirm this.

The **hepatitis C PCR test** can detect the hepatitis C virus itself. If the result is positive, it proves that you are carrying the virus, and you may be at risk of future complications, such as chronic hepatitis. If the result is negative, it means either:

- the hepatitis C virus is no longer present in your body, or
- the hepatitis C virus is still present, but on the day of the test was at a very low level. This is common—the amount of hepatitis C virus in the blood frequently fluctuates.

Further blood tests (liver function tests) tell if your liver is inflamed because of the hepatitis C infection.

- If the results are normal, the tests should be repeated by your doctor every 12 months.
- If the results show inflammation of the liver, you should be referred to a specialist.

To stay as healthy as possible

Limit alcohol intake to one standard drink a day, or preferably stop drinking alcohol.

Minimise medications which can be toxic to the liver (eg paracetamol). You should tell your doctor about your hepatitis C so he/she knows which drugs to prescribe.

Consider vaccination against hepatitis A and hepatitis B, if you are not already immune.

Discuss this with your doctor, as you may need to have a blood test first.

How to stop the spread of hepatitis C

If you have a positive hepatitis C test:

- Do not share injecting drug equipment, such as needles, syringes, water, mixing spoons or plates.
- Do not share razors or toothbrushes.
- Do not donate blood, semen or other body tissues or organs.
- Advise health care workers, including your dentist, that you are hepatitis C positive.
- In acute infection it is advisable to use condoms when having sex. Condoms should always be used for anal sex.

More information and support services

The Hepatitis Alphabet by Sievert, Korman and Bolin, Gore & Osment, publisher

STD Services web site:

www.stdservices.on.net/std/hepatitis_c

South Australian Department of Human Services, Public and Environmental Health Service Hepatitis C Book:

www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/topics/topic-hep-c-book.htm

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners Hepatitis C information:

www.racgp.org.au/healthinfo/hepatitisc.htm

Hepatitis C Council of South Australia

telephone: (08) 8362 8443

web site:

www.hepccouncilsa.asn.au

Adelaide Counselling Team

(free service for people with hepatitis C)

telephone: (08) 8363 2000

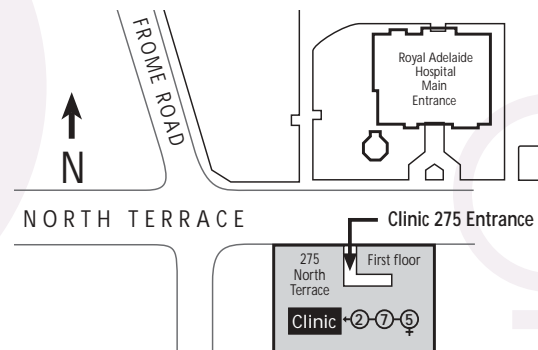
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STD Services June 2007

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Sexually Transmitted Diseases Services

Royal Adelaide Hospital

Free and confidential advice, testing and treatment for all STDs including HIV/AIDS

No appointment necessary

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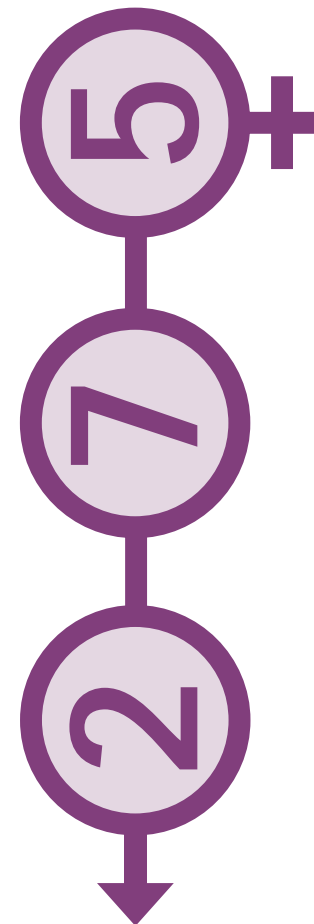
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