

# HEPATITIS C

## WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection that causes inflammation and over time destroys healthy liver cells causing permanent damage.

About one in four people clear hepatitis C on their own (spontaneous clearance), and the others go on to develop chronic hepatitis C.

The destroyed cells of the liver are then replaced with scar tissue. When this happens, it is a process called fibrosis. If the viral infection is left untreated, more of the liver gets replaced with scar tissue until nearly all the liver is scarred; this is called cirrhosis.

There is no vaccination available against hepatitis C and there is no immunity to hepatitis C, meaning you can get reinfected again even if you have had it before.

## SYMPTOMS

Acute hepatitis C refers to the first six months after infection with the virus. Between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of people infected do not develop symptoms during the acute phase. If symptoms occur, they usually include:

- Flu-like symptoms
- Jaundice
- Dark urine
- Muscle pain
- Loss of appetite
- Joint pain
- Fatigue

The time between exposure to the virus and development of symptoms on average is six weeks. Approximately 20 to 25 per cent of those infected with hepatitis C will spontaneously clear the virus but will remain positive for the antibody test for life.

## HOW IT SPREADS

Hepatitis C is spread through direct blood-to-blood contact with an infected person. The hepatitis C virus is small and resilient. It only takes a tiny amount of blood to pass on hepatitis C. The hepatitis C virus can survive outside the body, in open air, for at least four days. In certain conditions, such as inside a syringe, the virus can survive for weeks.

## DIAGNOSIS

A blood test will tell you if you have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. The test can detect antibodies to hepatitis C in your blood as early as eight weeks after a possible exposure but should be done after 14 to 20 weeks to be sure. A positive antibody test indicates previous exposure. A blood test to detect the presence of the actual virus (HCV-PCR) will be ordered by your health care provider if your initial screening detects antibodies to hepatitis C.

## TREATMENT

Treatment is available for hepatitis C. The treatment regimen can last up to a year. You will need to be assessed by your health care practitioner and referred to a specialist for follow-up.

## PREVENTION

- Treat all blood and body fluids as potentially infectious; disinfect or properly dispose of equipment that has been in contact with body fluids
- Apply a solution of one-part bleach mixed with nine parts water and leave it on the contaminated surface for at least ten minutes
- Do not share needles, spoons, snorting straws and other drug-related equipment with others

People who carry the hepatitis C virus can do the following to prevent spreading it to others:

- Inform your sexual partners; practice safer sex by using condoms from beginning to end of all oral, anal, or vaginal sex
- Do not donate blood, blood products, organ tissues and semen
- Do not share personal hygiene items such as razor blades, toothbrushes, nail clippers, etc.
- People living with diabetes should not share their glucometer or equipment with others
- Keep cuts and lesions covered
- Inform your health care providers that you have hepatitis C

**Hepatitis C is a reportable disease. York Region Community and Health Services must be notified so appropriate follow-up can be done.**

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- York Region Public Health Sexual Health Clinics **1-800-361-5653, # 1**
- [catie.ca](http://catie.ca)
- [sexandu.ca](http://sexandu.ca)