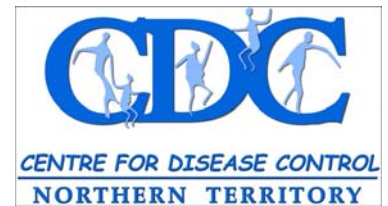


# Hepatitis C



## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that affects the liver.

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Some viruses, drugs, chemicals and alcohol can cause hepatitis.

## How is it spread?

The Hepatitis C virus is carried in the blood and is passed on when the blood of an infected person enters the blood-stream of another person.

It only takes a very small amount of infected blood to spread the virus.

The most common way to get hepatitis C is by sharing equipment used to inject drugs.



Other ways hepatitis C can be transmitted include:



- any blood contact before during or after a drug injecting episode
- using contaminated equipment for tattooing and body piercing
- using other peoples personal items such as razors and toothbrushes
- for women who are hepatitis C positive, there is a small risk of transmission to their babies during pregnancy or birth



Before screening of blood donors was introduced in Australia in 1990 it was



possible for hepatitis C to be transmitted through blood transfusion and blood products.

Hepatitis C is not classified as a sexually transmissible infection (STI), however it is a risk if blood-to-blood contact occurs during sexual activities.

Hepatitis C is **NOT** passed on by kissing, shaking hands, coughing, sharing household items or by living in a house with a person who has hepatitis C.

## What are the symptoms?

Hepatitis C is a slow-acting virus and for most people infection will not result in serious disease.

The first stage of infection (acute hepatitis C) is often mild, lasts less than 6 months and goes unnoticed in most people. If symptoms are experienced they may include nausea, dark urine, tiredness and abdominal discomfort. Jaundice (yellow colouring of skin and eyes) is rare in hepatitis C.

Infection is termed chronic if it lasts more than 6 months. While hepatitis C can live in the body for years without causing symptoms, long-term infection may lead to liver damage.

Hepatitis C is cleared from the body without medical intervention in about 25% of people within 2-6 months of being infected.



## How can Hepatitis C be prevented?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C and it is possible to become infected with hepatitis C more than once. Antibodies produced by the body to fight the infection do not protect against further infections.

To avoid getting or passing on the virus, reduce the risk of blood-to-blood contact by :

- safer injecting behaviours and safe disposal of used equipment
- choosing a practitioner who consistently uses sterile equipment and standard infection control procedures for tattooing or piercing
- not sharing any personal items (razor, toothbrush, tweezers, scissors)
- disclosure of past practices and hepatitis C status when donating blood

## Testing for Hepatitis C

The initial screening blood test looks for antibodies to the virus. Antibodies to hepatitis C are usually present 6 weeks after infection but may take up to 6 months to develop.

A PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) blood test looks for the presence of the virus in the blood.

Liver Function Tests (LFTs) are blood tests used to monitor the ongoing condition of the liver.

Hepatitis C is a notifiable disease and positive results are registered with the Centre for Disease Control. This information is confidential.

## Treatment

Treatment is available and assessment for treatment is made on an individual basis following referral to a specialist doctor.

Treatment is usually given over a period of 6-12 months. Individual response to treatment varies and for some people the side effects of the medication can be severe.

## For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control or Clinic 34.

Darwin	89992678
Alice Springs	89517549
Katherine	89739049
Nhulunbuy	89870359
Tennant Creek	89624259

Or access the Centre for Disease Control web page at:  
<http://www.nt.gov.au/health/cdc/cdc.shtml>

The NT AIDS and Hepatitis Council can also provide information about the range of services available.

Phone: 89411711