
GENERAL HEPATITIS C INFORMATION

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is one of several viruses that cause hepatitis, an acute or chronic inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis C can lead to liver damage and possibly cancer. Hepatitis C was first identified in 1989. Before that it was called non-A non-B hepatitis. Since 1992, the Red Cross has screened blood donations for hepatitis C.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may appear 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure to the virus, but 75% of people have no signs of illness. Of those with symptoms, the most common is chronic fatigue, but may also include lack of appetite, nausea, vomiting, itchiness, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), joint and muscle aches. Complications of hepatitis C include chronic liver disease such as cirrhosis, liver cancer and liver failure.

What is a chronic carrier?

75 – 85% of people infected with hepatitis C become chronic carriers which means that they have the virus in their blood for the rest of their lives and can unknowingly spread it to others. Most carriers remain symptom free for many years. However, some do become ill because of ongoing damage to their liver.

How is HCV spread?

HCV is spread when people share blood or body fluids containing blood.

Activities that put you at risk of getting hepatitis C are:

- ▶ Sharing needles, spoons, straws and other drug related equipment
- ▶ Getting tattoos or body parts pierced with used or non-sterile needles

- ▶ Receiving blood transfusions or blood products before 1992.

Studies show that 5% to 10% of women who have HCV pass it on to their babies before or at the time of birth.

Breastfeeding does not pass HCV from mother to baby. If the nipples are bleeding or cracked it is recommended that breast feeding be stopped until healed.

Sexual transmission is very low. The risk may increase when there are open genital sores and during menstrual periods.

How is hepatitis C detected?

A doctor can perform a blood test that detects hepatitis C.

How to prevent the spread of hepatitis C

- ▶ Do not share any equipment for drug use, tattooing and body/ear piercing.
- ▶ Do not donate blood or organs for transplants.
- ▶ Practice safer sex by using a condom every time.

Resources for more information

Further information can be obtained from: Canadian Liver Foundation
(416) 491-3353 or 1-(800) 563-5483
www.liver.ca

Health Line Peel
(905) 799-7700