

Living well with hepatitis C virus

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C virus (HCV)?

Most people who have HCV feel well, will have no symptoms and may not know they have HCV. They may not know that they have been exposed to the virus. Some people may have a brief illness with symptoms appearing around 6 weeks after they have been infected with the virus. You need a blood test to see if you have HCV.

About 75% of people living with HCV will develop a chronic (lifelong) infection. People with chronic HCV may feel tired or have a low mood or stomach pain. They may pass the virus on to other people.

Without treatment, some people with chronic HCV will develop significant liver disease. This can lead to scarring of the liver (cirrhosis), liver failure or liver cancer in a small number of people.

Is there a vaccine for HCV?

There is no vaccine available for HCV.

Is hepatitis C virus curable?

Yes. HCV is curable. Newer, highly effective drugs to treat HCV are covered by BC PharmaCare. These drugs have few side effects and are easier to take (no injections) than older medications. In 8 to 12 weeks, most patients can be cured of HCV. It is possible to get re-infected with HCV after being cured.

If you have chronic HCV, you should see your health care provider regularly. During these visits, you may have physical exams and other tests to see how healthy your liver is. You may also be referred to a specialist for further testing. Early treatment can prevent very serious liver disease, liver cancer, or the need for a liver transplant.

How can I prevent passing HCV on to others?

HCV is spread through blood-to-blood contact. While there is a very low risk of spreading the virus through other bodily fluids, such as semen or vaginal fluids, HCV is more likely to spread if blood is present in those fluids.

If you are living with HCV, you can reduce the chance of passing the virus to others by doing the following:

- Do not share drug equipment, such as straws, pipes, cookers, filters, water, needles or syringes
- Never donate your blood, semen, body organs or tissues
- Tell your health care provider if you have ever donated or received blood products or tissue transplants
- Tell anyone whose blood has direct contact with your blood to visit a local public health unit or their health care provider
- Tell your health care provider, dentist and anyone else who might come in contact with your blood, (for example, when getting tattoos, body-piercing, electrolysis or acupuncture), that you are living with HCV. This will allow them to take precautions to help prevent virus transmission
- Practice safer sex. Talk with your partner(s) about being tested for sexually transmitted and blood borne infections (STBBI), and that you are living with HCV
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, dental floss, nail files or other items that could have tiny amounts of blood on them
- Bandage all open cuts and sores until healed
- Put articles with blood on them in a separate plastic bag before disposing into household

garbage (for example, bandages, tissues, tampons, razors, dental floss)

- Clean and disinfect areas that could have blood on them using a fresh solution of household bleach. Make a bleach solution by mixing 1 part bleach to 9 parts of water. Leave the bleach solution in contact with the area for at least 10 minutes before wiping it up
- Breast or chestfeeding is safe, unless the nipple or areola is cracked or bleeding. During this time, the milk should be expressed and discarded. When your nipple or areola is no longer cracked or bleeding, you can resume breast or chestfeeding

What can I do to stay as healthy as possible?

To promote good health while living with HCV, learn about the disease and consider the following:

- Access direct-acting antiviral treatments (DAAs) made publicly available through BC PharmaCare to all British Columbians living with HCV. Early treatment can prevent the disease from becoming a serious liver disease
- Get more information about hepatitis C from your health care provider, local health unit or support groups
- Avoid alcohol as it can cause further damage to your liver. If you do drink alcohol, try to reduce the amount that you drink
- Avoid drug use and smoking
- Only use prescribed over-the-counter medications, or other herbal or alternative therapies as advised by your health care provider
- Maintain a healthy weight

- Reduce stress and get adequate sleep
- Get protected against other diseases. The following vaccines are provided free to anyone who has ever been infected with HCV:
 - Hepatitis A and B vaccines (if you are not already immune). Hepatitis A and hepatitis B virus may cause further liver damage
 - Pneumococcal polysaccharide vaccine
 - Influenza vaccine. For your best protection you should get the vaccine every year as soon as it is available (usually October)

For more information

- [HealthLinkBC File #40a Hepatitis C virus](#)
- [Hepatitis Education Canada](#)
- [Canadian Liver Foundation](#)
- [Help-4-Hep](#)
- [CATIE – Long term liver health](#)

Information on harm reduction:

- [HealthLinkBC File #102a Understanding harm reduction: Substance use](#)

Information on related diseases:

- [HealthLinkBC File #97 Contact with blood or body fluids: Protecting against infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #25a Hepatitis B vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #33 Hepatitis A vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #62c Pneumococcal conjugate \(PCV 20\) vaccine](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #12d Inactivated influenza \(flu\) vaccine](#)



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