



GETTING STARTED

**IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW
WHEN YOU HAVE HEPATITIS C**

GETTING STARTED:

Important things to know when you have hepatitis C

If you just found out that you have hepatitis C, you may have a lot of questions.

Reading this booklet may answer your questions about hepatitis C and help you decide what to do next.

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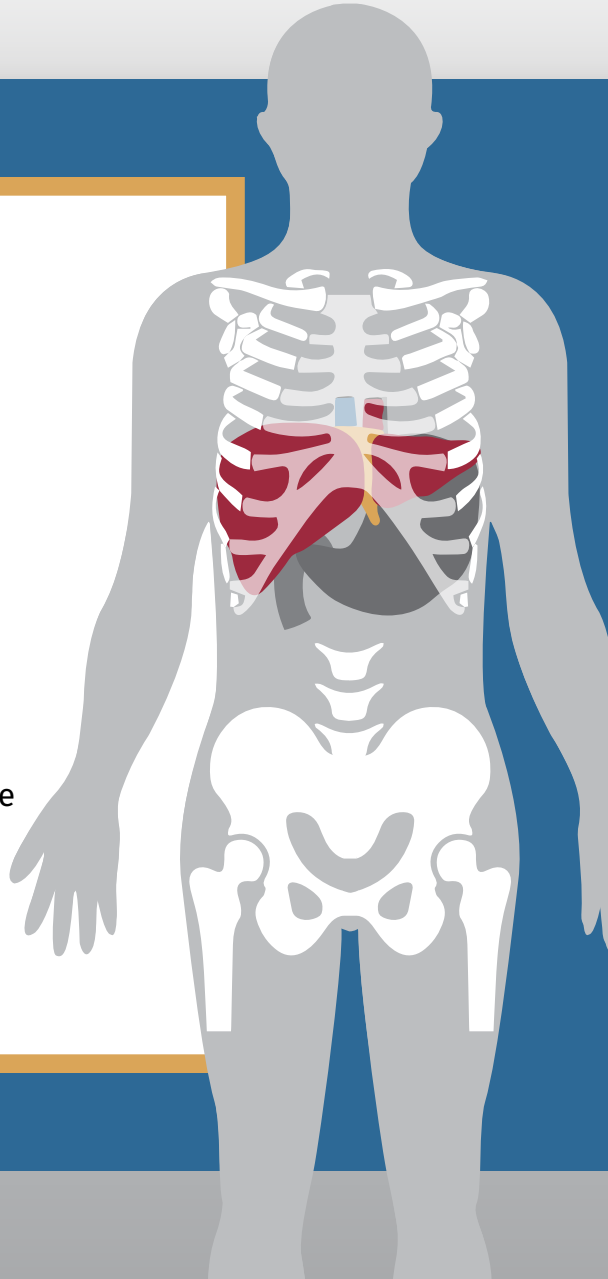
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What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a disease caused by a virus. The hepatitis C virus can damage your liver.

Often the damage happens slowly, but sometimes it happens more quickly.

This damage can hurt your health and the quality of your life. Since liver damage usually happens slowly, most people can live a long time with hepatitis C.



Can I be treated and cured of hepatitis C?



Yes! New medicines can cure most people.

Being cured may stop the damage to your liver and make the quality of your life better.

Here are some important facts about treatment.

- Treatment means taking pills for 8 to 12 weeks.
- For most people, the new medicines cause few problems. If they cause side effects, they are usually mild.
- Government programs may cover the cost of your treatment. Ask your nurse or doctor for more information.
- If you get cured of hepatitis C you are not protected from getting it again if the hepatitis C virus gets into your body.
- If you are cured but get hepatitis C again, you might not be eligible for another treatment through certain provincial or territorial drug programs.

How can I know for sure that I have hepatitis C?

Blood tests tell you if you have hepatitis C.

You can get tested at places such as doctor's offices, clinics, hospitals or community drop-in centres. They will do two different blood tests:

- one to check for antibodies your body makes when it fights a hepatitis C infection, and
- one to see if the hepatitis C virus is in your blood



If there are hepatitis C **antibodies** in your blood, it means the hepatitis C virus **has been** in your body at some point in time. It might not mean you still have hepatitis C. This is because, for some people, the body gets rid of the virus on its own. If this happens it usually occurs in the first 6 months after a person gets hepatitis C.

If the hepatitis C virus is in your blood, it means you do have hepatitis C.

Is it normal to have different feelings after finding out I have hepatitis C?



Yes. It is normal to feel worried, numb, relieved, sad, afraid or even OK when you find out you have hepatitis C. Different people have different feelings and they can change over time.

Give yourself time to get used to the news. As you learn more, you may find that having hepatitis C gets easier to manage.

If you feel overwhelmed, try talking to someone you trust to help work out your feelings. For example, you could talk to a family member, friend, community worker, doctor, nurse or counsellor.

What can hepatitis C do to my body?

Hepatitis C can scar your liver. This scarring is called **fibrosis**. Over a long period of time, scarring might take over most of the liver. This is called **cirrhosis**. Cirrhosis can make it hard for your liver to work properly.

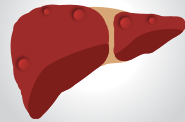
This can lead to serious health problems, such as liver cancer, liver failure or needing a liver transplant.

Drinking too much alcohol or living with HIV can speed up how quickly your liver gets damaged.

HEALTHY LIVER



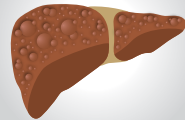
MILD DAMAGE



MODERATE DAMAGE



SEVERE DAMAGE



Why is my liver important to my health?

Your liver does many important things in your body.

These are some jobs your liver does.



It gets rid of things that can hurt your body, such as alcohol and drugs.



It changes the food you eat into fuel for your body.



It stores fuel and some vitamins and minerals.



It helps fight infections.

What symptoms of hepatitis C might I get?

When you first get hepatitis C, you might have no symptoms or you might have symptoms only for a short time. You might not feel sick for many years. This is normal because the liver can do many of its jobs even when damaged.

If your liver gets even more damaged, you might have more symptoms or your symptoms might get worse.

Some symptoms can have causes other than hepatitis C. But they might mean your liver is not working well. Talk to your healthcare worker about your symptoms. There might be things you can do to feel better.

These are some of the symptoms of hepatitis C that you might get.

- flu symptoms, such as being tired, having pain in your muscles or joints, having headaches, or feeling sick to your stomach
- pain around the right side of your ribs where your liver is
- itchy skin
- yellowing of the eyes or skin (jaundice)
- mental changes, such as not thinking clearly or having difficulty remembering (“brain fog”)
- emotional changes, such as feeling hopeless, sad, afraid, or worried
- feeling very tired
- swelling in the legs
- swelling of the stomach area (abdomen)



How often should I see a doctor or nurse about hepatitis C?



It is a good idea to see a doctor or a nurse soon after finding out you have hepatitis C. See the checklist on the next page for questions to ask at this appointment.

It is important to keep seeing your doctor or nurse **every 6 to 12 months** to check your liver for damage. This is because even when you feel well and have no symptoms the hepatitis C virus can still be damaging your liver.

It is also important to see your doctor or nurse if you get new or worse symptoms.

Here is a checklist of things you can talk about when you see your doctor or nurse.

- Ask if you have had the blood test that checks for the hepatitis C virus. This could be the hepatitis C RNA test or the core antigen test.
- Find out the type (genotype) of hepatitis C you have. The hepatitis C genotypes are 1a, 1b, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. Your genotype might affect what medicines can be used if you get treated for hepatitis C.
- Talk about your treatment options. For example,
 - if and when to start treatment
 - the type of medicine that might be used if you get treated for hepatitis C
 - if the cost of the medicine will be covered
- Have your liver checked for damage. This could mean having a physical exam, a scan of your liver (FibroScan), or blood tests
- Ask if you need to see a doctor who is a hepatitis C specialist
- Check that your vaccinations are up to date, including hepatitis A and B and the flu. Ask how to protect yourself from other infections, such as HIV or other genotypes of hepatitis C.
- If you take vitamins, herbal preparations or over-the-counter medications ask your doctor about which ones are safe for the liver.

How can I protect myself and others from hepatitis C?

Know what is safe!

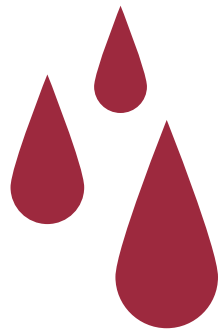


Hepatitis C is **NOT** passed by things like food, drinking water, dishes, clothes, hugs, kisses, coughs, toilet seats, or swimming pools.

Know how hepatitis C is passed

Hepatitis C is passed when the blood of a person with hepatitis C gets into another person's bloodstream. This is called blood-to-blood contact.

Blood-to-blood contact can happen even when the amount of blood is so small you cannot see it.



To prevent blood-to-blood contact, take the following steps:

- If you take street drugs, use new equipment **every time**, such as needles, water, spoons, cookers, crack pipes, or straws.
- Before you get a piercing or a tattoo, ask if the ink and equipment are new. If the equipment is used, ask if it has been sterilized.
- Use only your own personal items, such as razors, toothbrushes and nail clippers.

Hepatitis C can be passed through unsterilized medical or dental equipment. But it is rare for unsterilized medical or dental equipment to be used in Canada.



Can hepatitis C be passed through sex?

Sex is low risk for passing hepatitis C, unless there is blood, even if you cannot see it. To protect yourself and others, use a condom and lube in situations like rough sex or when HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) might be present.

What else can I do to take care of my health?

You can take care of your health by being kind to yourself.

Try some of the activities in the checklist on the next page to help protect your liver and keep yourself as healthy as you can.

Some of these activities can be hard to do so be patient with yourself. Do what you can. **Small changes can make a difference!**

- Drink 4 to 8 glasses of water every day.
- Eat as well as you can. Try to eat lots of fruit and vegetables. Eat fewer processed foods, such as prepared foods that come in a box. Eat less sugar and salt.
- Try to get at least 7 hours of sleep.
- Try to do some exercise every day, such as gentle stretching, walking or swimming.
- Try activities that relax you, such as meditation or deep breathing.
- Spend time with your friends and family.
- Try to drink less alcohol or no alcohol. Alcohol can damage your liver.
- Try to smoke less or quit smoking. You may want to ask your doctor or nurse for advice about quitting smoking.
- If you use street drugs, use new equipment every time so you do not get other infections.

Who do I need to tell that I have hepatitis C?

It is up to you who you tell that you have hepatitis C. Your health information is confidential. If you don't want to, you do not have to tell your employer, landlord, school, family or friends.

You may want to tell certain friends or family members that you have hepatitis C so they can help or support you if you need it.

When deciding who to tell about your hepatitis C, take your time. Ask yourself these questions:



Who will try to understand?



Who will respect my privacy?



Who will listen to my feelings?



Who will give me emotional support?

If I don't like how people are treating me because I have hepatitis C, what can I do?

Some people you tell about your hepatitis C may not react the way you would hope. This can make you feel bad. Nobody has the right to judge you because you have hepatitis C.

It is against the law for someone to treat you differently, or discriminate against you, because you have an illness or a disability.

Remember that you, and everyone else, have the right to healthcare. You may find that some doctors do not want to treat your hepatitis C if you use street drugs. But treatment guidelines are clear, people who use street drugs can be treated for hepatitis C.



Think about joining a support group

- to help you deal with having hepatitis C
- if others are treating you differently
- to meet other people with hepatitis C

Some support groups meet in person and some meet online.

If your problems are affecting your life, such as your ability to work or get proper care, you may want to talk to someone who can help with your rights, such as at your local human rights tribunal. See the next page for information on how to find a tribunal near you.

You may want to give some information about hepatitis C to certain people in your life or ask someone else to give it to them. Learning more about hepatitis C can help your friends or family members to be more open and to give you the emotional comfort or other help you may need.

See the next page for more sources of information about hepatitis C.

Where can I get more information about hepatitis C?

When ready, you can learn more about hepatitis C from booklets or websites, support groups for people with hepatitis C, or a doctor or nurse.

For free booklets and other information about hepatitis C,

- visit the website for CATIE at CATIE.ca or call **1-800-263-1638** (a private line to ask about hepatitis C)
- visit the website hepatitiseducation.ca (Look for the patient page or resource centre.)

For information about services for hepatitis C in Canada,

- visit the website hcv411.ca
- visit the the Canadian Liver Foundation website liver.ca or call **1-800-563-5483** (a helpline for patients)

For information about dealing with serious problems when people do not respect your rights,

- visit the website of the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal at chrt-tcdp.gc.ca (Look for the resource page and click on useful links for provincial or territorial listings.)

Disclaimer

Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV- and hepatitis C-related illness and the treatments in question.

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