



Durham Region Health Department **Facts about...**



Hepatitis C

What is it?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection that attacks the liver. The onset of illness is vague and often there are no signs or symptoms. Most people do not know that they are infected with the hepatitis C virus. Some people will be able to clear the infection on their own; however 75-85% of infections become chronic if left untreated. People with hepatitis C are more likely to develop chronic conditions like cirrhosis or liver cancer.

How is it spread?

Hepatitis C virus is spread when the blood of an infected person gets into the bloodstream of another person.

The following groups are at higher risk for hepatitis C infection:

- People who inject and/or inhale drugs (past or present).
- People who share drug-using equipment (needles, straws, pipes, spoons, cookers).
- People who receive body piercings, tattoos, electrolysis, and/or acupuncture.
- People who share self-care items (razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes) with an infected person.
- People who have received dialysis.
- People who are infected with HIV.
- People who have had unprotected sex with the same sex or opposite sex.
- Sex trade workers.
- Workers exposed to supplies or needles that contain blood.
- People who have received blood products or tissue/organ transplant in Canada before 1992.
- People who have had invasive medical or dental procedures.
- People who are homeless, underhoused, or have lived in a correctional facility.
- People born to a pregnant person with hepatitis C.

There is a small risk that a pregnant person with hepatitis C infection can pass the virus to their baby. It is very unlikely to pass hepatitis C virus from breastfeeding. Pregnant persons with signs of acute hepatitis C infection (e.g., jaundice) after the baby is born should not breastfeed. Breastfeeding persons with cracked or bleeding nipples should pump and dump breastmilk until they heal.

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What do I look for?

Most people with hepatitis C have no symptoms. Symptoms can start slowly and progress over time. Symptoms may include lack of appetite, feeling tired, nausea, stomach pain or jaundice (i.e., yellowing of the eyes and skin).

If you have risk factors for hepatitis C, symptoms and/or to find out your hepatitis C status, speak to your healthcare provider about testing.

How is it treated?

Hepatitis C is now considered a curable infection. New medications are more effective and have fewer side effects. Treatment is short-term lasting 12-24 weeks. The goal of treatment is to cure the hepatitis C infection, prevent liver damage, and to prevent the spread of the virus.

People with hepatitis C infection should speak with their health care provider to find out if treatment is an option.

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

How can I protect myself?

- Do not share needles or drug equipment.
- If using needles have a new needle each time. You can get new needles and injection equipment from Project X Change (John Howard Society of Durham Region).
- Practice safer sex. Use condoms/ dental dams (barriers) for all sexual activity.
- Avoid sharing any self-care items (e.g., razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, scissors).
- Carefully explore any beauty/body art sites (e.g., tattoo, piercing, spa, nails, acupuncture). Durham, the Health Department's inspection and investigation results for personal service settings are now available online through the new inspections portal at durham.ca/KnowBeforeYouGo
- If you have hepatitis C, you can receive vaccine for hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and pneumococcal disease.
- If you have hepatitis C, do not donate blood, tissue, organs, or semen.
- If you have hepatitis C, ensure any drug sharing partners or sexual partners are tested.
- Cover up any open sores or breaks in your skin.
- Use gloves to clean items/surfaces that contain blood.
- Clean blood spills with soap and water, then disinfect the surface with a bleach solution (one-part household bleach to nine parts water). The surface is to remain wet for a minimum of 10 minutes.

July 7, 2023

