

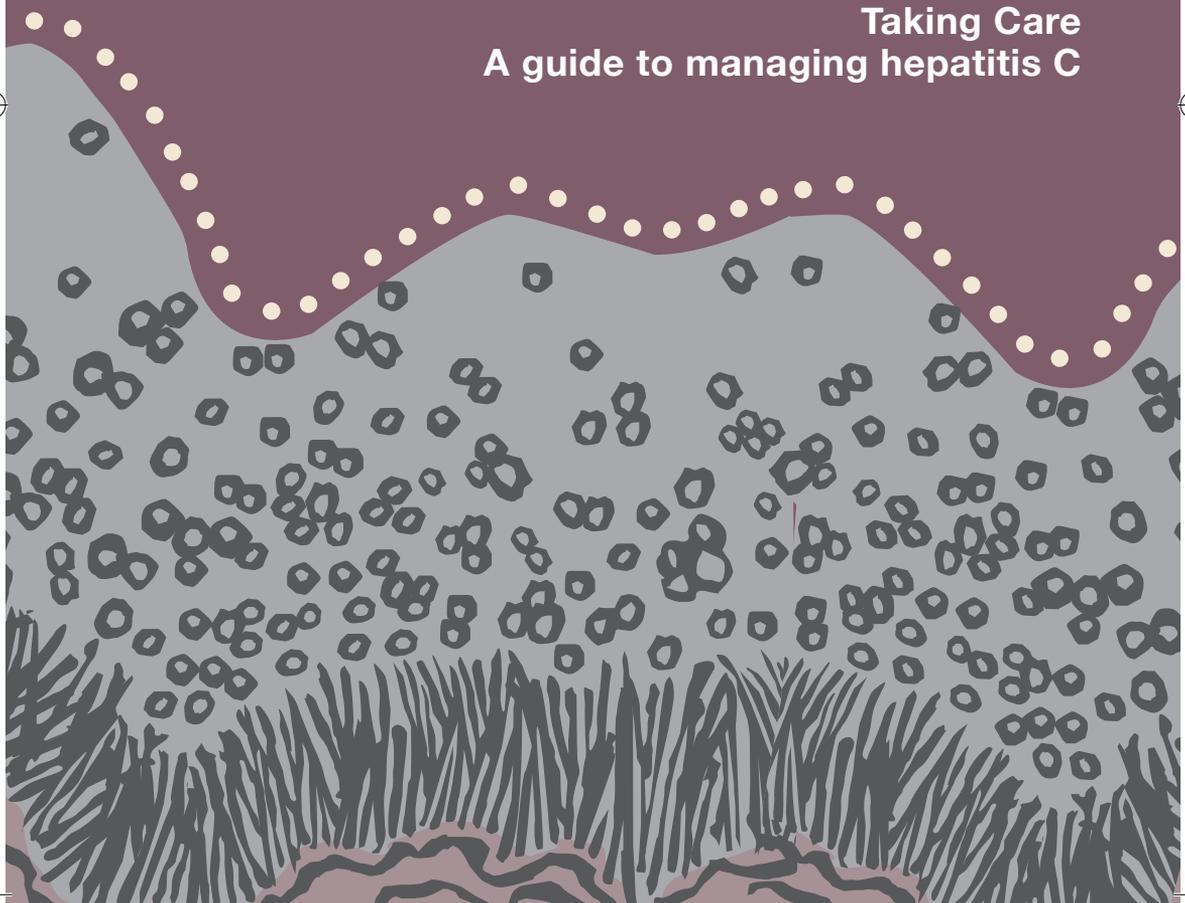


Strong Spirit Strong Mind

Aboriginal Ways of Reducing Harm
From Alcohol and Other Drugs

Taking Care

A guide to managing hepatitis C



What's this all about?

If you have been given this booklet by your doctor or health care worker it is because you have tested positive to the hepatitis C virus.

What is hepatitis?

'Hepatitis' is a word that means your liver has become inflamed. Sometimes it may feel tender or swollen. Hepatitis can be caused by viruses, alcohol consumption, some drugs, and some chemicals. There are five different hepatitis viruses (A, B, C, D & E). They are passed on in different ways but all affect the liver.



What is hepatitis C (hep C)?

Hep C is a blood-borne virus (BBV), and it is passed on by blood-to-blood contact. That means it has been passed on to you by the blood from a person with the hep C virus getting into your bloodstream.

Blood-to-blood contact can occur, for example, through injecting drug use, sharing personal items like razors and toothbrushes, tattooing and piercing, fighting, and some ceremonial practices.

There are several types of hep C, which are called strains or genotypes.

It is possible to become infected with more than one strain of hep C.

There is no vaccine for hep C, and you cannot develop immunity. Even if you have cleared the virus it is possible for you to become infected again.



What do the blood tests mean?

The first hep C test your doctor ordered was a blood test which is called an antibody test. This shows whether you have ever been exposed to hep C. Some people clear the virus naturally, so you could test positive to the antibody test but not actually have the virus anymore.

It can take up to 12 weeks before the hep C virus shows up in your blood. Sometimes even if your antibody test is negative, your doctor might suggest that you have a second antibody test to be sure.

If you test positive to the antibody test you will need a different test to see whether you have cleared the virus, or have an ongoing infection. This second test is called a Polymerase Chain Reaction (**PCR**) test. It shows if you have the hep C virus present in your blood. PCR tests can also show the level of virus in your blood.



If you have tested positive to hep C your doctor may ask you to have a **Liver Function Test**. This is a simple blood test which is used to check on the condition of your liver. When you have hep C it is very important to keep a check on your liver so your doctor will probably want to do this test again, in the future.

There is another PCR test which is used to tell what strain of hep C you have. This information is important as it helps with managing your hep C, and making decisions about treatment. Some strains of hep C are easier to treat than others. Your doctor or liver specialist will talk to you about these tests.



How might you feel?

Everyone reacts differently to hep C. At first, some people feel like they have a mild flu, or they might experience nausea, dark urine, and their skin and eyes might turn a bit yellow. These symptoms clear up but it does not mean the virus has gone away. If you have hep C you may have no symptoms at all, but you could still pass on the virus.



About 75% of people who have hep C will develop chronic hepatitis. This means they have had the hep C virus for more than six months. That is, they have not cleared the virus. (It doesn't indicate how severe the illness is). Sometimes they have symptoms like being tired, having no appetite, feeling unwell or vomiting, having fever, joint pain or soreness in the liver area.



Healthy liver

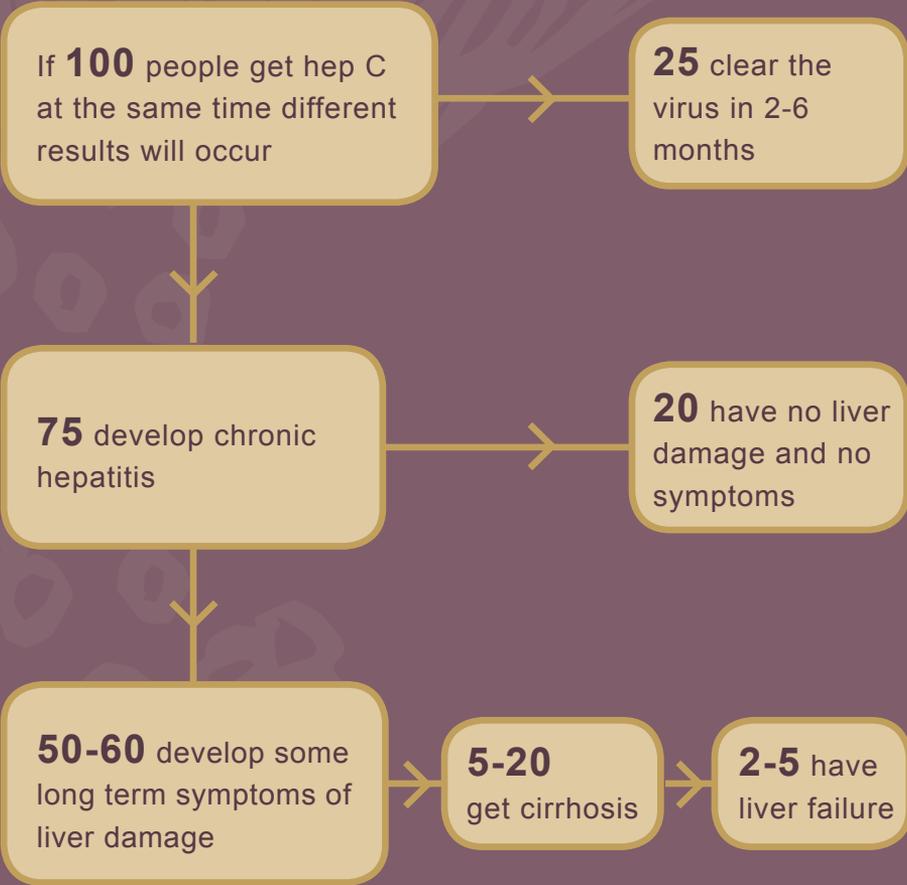


Inflamed liver



Cirrhosis

Liver damage from hep C is usually slow. It may be 20 years before some of the effects show. When cirrhosis occurs it means the liver is becoming scarred, and cannot work properly. A few people with cirrhosis will develop liver cancer, and liver failure.



Everyone reacts differently to hep C

Things that can help you stay healthy

If you have chronic hep C there are a lot of things that you can do to help your body stay healthy:

1. Try to cut out or cut down on alcohol and other drugs which put a strain on your liver. Try to have some alcohol free days because drinking alcohol can speed up liver damage.
2. Eat good healthy food, like fruit and vegetables. And drink lots of water too.



3. Rest when you feel tired, and try to get plenty of sleep.

4. Try to avoid getting stressed. Things like meditation, relaxation activities, and gentle exercise can be very helpful.
5. See your doctor or health care worker regularly for checkups.



6. Be blood aware. (See pages 10-14). Even when you have hep C it is still possible to become infected with other strains of the virus.

7. It is a good idea to protect yourself from other types of hepatitis viruses, as these will put more strain on your liver. Vaccines are available for hep A and hep B – you should discuss getting vaccinated with your doctor.



8. Sometimes people with chronic hep C feel really down or blue. It can be good to have someone that you trust who you can talk to.



9. When you are making decisions about your health it is really important to have correct information. Sometimes things can be complicated and it is really good to have someone who can explain things in plain language. On page 23 is a list of organisations where you can get some more help and support.

Keeping yourself, your family and your community safe

Hep C is spread by blood-to-blood contact. You cannot get hep C from activities where there is not blood-to-blood contact.

You can't get it from:

- kissing and hugging,
- sharing cigarettes,
- sharing food or drinks,
- using the same plates and cups,
- coughing or sneezing,
- sharing toilets,
- or from insect bites.



Keeping yourself, your family and your community safe

If you have hep C your blood carries the infection so you need to become blood aware, and make sure your blood does not get into another person's bloodstream.

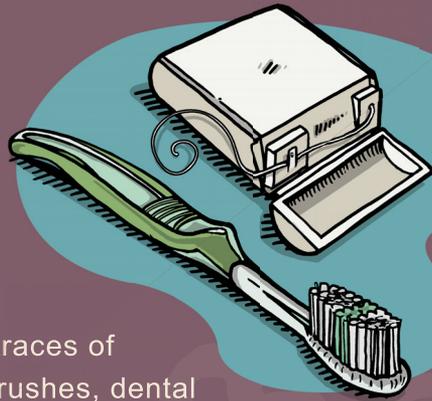
If you inject drugs there is a special section in this book which is about safer injecting practices. (See pages 15-18).

Although you have hep C you can still be infected by other strains, and the things that you do to keep other people safe can also reduce the chance of you picking up other infections (such as hep B and HIV).



Keeping yourself, your family and your community safe

Hep C can be carried by the tiny traces of blood on items like razors, toothbrushes, dental floss, nail scissors, and mouth guards – so do not use other people's or let them use yours.



If you have a blood spill you need to wipe your blood up straight away with paper towels, and clean the area with bleach or cold water and detergent.

Try to avoid getting into physical fights because hep C can be spread through fights where there has been blood spilled.

If you have sex where blood could be present, to avoid spreading hep C always use condoms, dental dams, and lubricant.



This will also protect you from other BBVs and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).



Keeping yourself, your family and your community safe

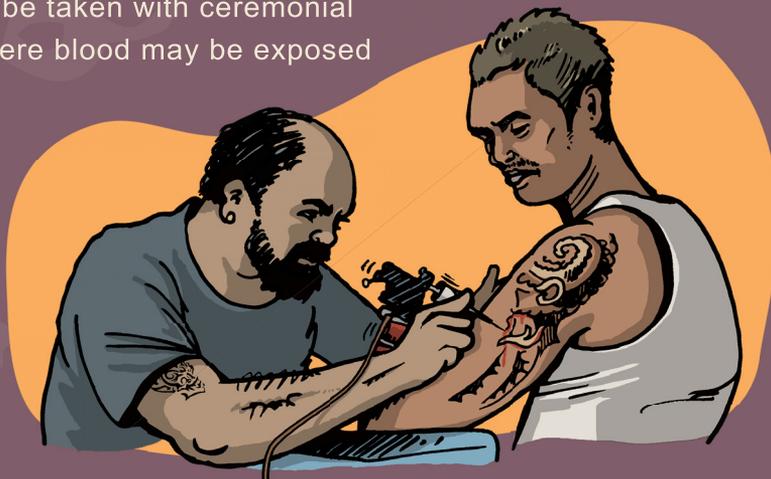
If you are someone who likes to play contact sport you need to follow the 'Blood Rules'. If you are bleeding you must leave the field and get your wounds dressed. Play must stop until the blood spill is cleaned up.



Tattooing and body piercing can spread the hep C virus.

Always use sterile, single use needles for body piercing and tattooing, and avoid sharing jewellery.

Care should be taken with ceremonial practices where blood may be exposed or shared.



Keeping your baby safe

If you have hep C and you are pregnant you should talk with your health care worker. All babies born to hep C positive mothers will test antibody positive at birth because they have their mothers' antibodies.

By about 18 months, 95% of babies will have cleared the antibodies. The chance of passing on hep C to your baby is very low.



Women with hep C should talk to their health care workers about safe practices when feeding their babies. Breastfeeding is very important for newborn babies. Hep C can be present in breast milk, but the levels are very low and not a risk to the baby. But, if your nipples become cracked or bleed you should stop breastfeeding until they heal.



Information for injecting drug users

Injecting drugs carries many risks.

In Australia most hep C infections come from sharing injecting equipment.

To avoid spreading or getting other strains of hep C and other BBVs, the safest choice is to not inject drugs.



Thinking about using less or stopping?

If you are thinking about cutting out or cutting down your injecting drug use there are treatments which can help. Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) counsellors can help you work out what might be worth trying.

Your counsellor can also help you with things like safer practices, reducing your risk, managing withdrawals, and they can provide confidential on-going support.

Maybe you could change how you use?

If you are planning to continue using drugs you might want to think about less risky ways of using – like swallowing, snorting, smoking or shafting.

Reducing risk when using

If you are going to continue injecting drugs the safest practice is to use a new, sterile needle and syringe (fit), sterile water, sterile swabs, clean filter, clean spoon and clean tourniquet every time.

Needles and syringes are available from:

- Most chemists
- Needle and syringe exchange programs (NSEPs) operated by the WA Substance Users' Association (WASUA) and the WA AIDS Council (WAAC) in the metro and south-west regions
- All regional hospitals and some nursing posts
- Some regional Public Health Units and other health services (such as HepatitisWA) also provide needles and syringes.

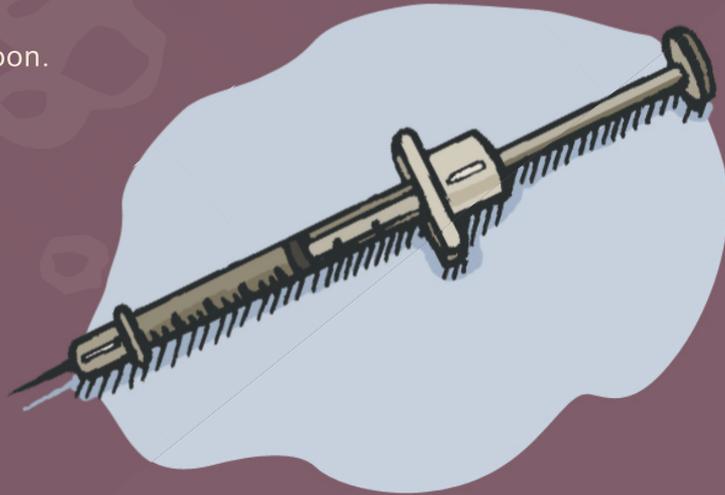


Less risky injecting practices:

Never use anyone else's equipment, as you risk spreading your strain of hep C and you may pick up new strains.

If you inject drugs always wash your hands, wipe down the preparation area and always inject with:

- A new sterile needle and syringe
- New sterile water
- New swabs (at least one to swab your spoon and one to swab your injecting site—remember to swab in one direction only, rubbing back and forth with a swab spreads dirt and germs)
- Your own tourniquet—never share
- New filter
- A clean spoon.





Remember:

- If you can't get a new fit, re-using your own fit is safer than using someone else's fit.
 - If you are planning to reuse your own fit, flush it out with cold running water immediately after use.
 - Traces of blood carrying hep C can be present in any used injecting equipment, including water.
 - Do not mix up with water that has been used to rinse equipment.
 - Do not put used fits in a shared mix – use separate spoons and separate water containers.
 - And do not let another person's blood get near your injecting site.
 - Always wipe down the places where you prepare your mix, before and after, use liquid bleach and other disinfectants.
 - You should recap your own fit, but do not recap another person's used fit.
- 

For more information about safer using contact WASUA (see contact details on page 23).

Looking after the community

Used needles and syringes can be a risk for other people, so always dispose of them in safe ways. If possible return them to the pack they came in, or put them into a sharps disposal container. Otherwise put the needle and syringe into a rigid plastic container such as a plastic cool drink bottle. Make sure the lid is on tightly and put the sealed container into a domestic rubbish bin. Do not use glass which can shattered or aluminium cans which can squash.



Treatment

Treatment is available for hep C, and may clear the hep C virus from your body. However, all strains respond to treatment differently. A lot of things influence treatment outcomes, and this needs to be discussed with your doctor or liver specialist. They will be able to advise you about your best treatment options.

To make a decision about whether to have treatment for hep C you need know:

- the benefits of treatment,
- what might happen if you don't have treatment,
- and, the likely side effects of the medications.

What's involved?

What is involved depends on the type of treatment suitable for you. At present a combination of drugs (pegylated interferon injections and ribavirin capsules) is thought to be best. This treatment can take from 24 to 48 weeks. During that time the doctor will keep a close check on your overall health to see how the treatment is affecting you.



Side effects and other concerns

These drugs can have strong side effects. Some of these side effects are unpleasant both physically and mentally, so you need to know what to expect. You should ask your doctor about the possible side effects so that you can make the right decision, and be prepared if you decide to go ahead.

Hep C treatment can leave you feeling very tired and nauseous. Sometimes people feel very depressed and they may have difficulty concentrating. This can make it difficult to deal with the pressures of work and home life. You may need support from other people to manage your daily life. You may find it helpful to talk with other people having treatment.

Health care workers can help you develop a good plan, and give you strategies to manage a range of side effects and symptoms. They can also put you in touch with support groups.





Do I have to tell anyone about my hep C?

If you test positive to hep C the doctor and the medical laboratory are required by law to notify the Health Department, however your personal information is kept confidential.

Legally you can not give blood. If you want to join the defence forces, take out life insurance or do work that involves some surgical procedures you would have to make your hep C status known. **But you do not have to tell anyone else. Who you choose to tell you have hep C is up to you.**

Sometimes people who tell others about their hep C find they are treated differently and discriminated against. This kind of thing can happen when other people are ignorant about how hep C is transmitted, and they are fearful. It is illegal to discriminate against people with hep C. If this happens to you there are people who can help you.



Who else can help?



Alcohol & Drug Information Service (ADIS)

www.dao.health.wa.gov.au

24 hr counselling & information line

Info line: **9442 5000** Toll free: **1800 198 024**

Email: ADIS@health.wa.gov.au

HepatitisWA

www.hepatitiswa.com.au

Education, information and support

Provides needle & syringe program

Information & support line: **9328 8538**

Freecall **1800 800 070**

Email: info@hepatitiswa.com.au

WA Substance Users' Association (WASUA)

www.wasua.com.au

Needle & Syringe Exchange Program

Treatment & referral service

Peer education

Information: **9321 2877**

References

Department of Health and Department of Corrective Services, WA.
(2005) Health in Prison Health Outta Prison.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2008) National Hepatitis C Resource Manual 2nd Edition.

A printable pdf version of the resource manual is available at:

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/Publishing.nsf/Content/phd-hepc-manual-2008>

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