

Hepatitis C

The term 'hepatitis' means inflammation of the liver. While other hepatitis viruses include hepatitis A, B, D, E, F and G, hepatitis A, B and C are more common. Hepatitis C is not commonly transmitted through unprotected sex, but affects many Australians through blood-to-blood contact.

Cause

Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus.

Symptoms

Some people infected with hepatitis C experience no symptoms at first, while others develop a flu-like illness. Sometimes urine also becomes dark and the skin and whites in the eyes turn yellow.

Symptoms may disappear after a few weeks, but this doesn't mean the infection has gone. Other symptoms include loss of appetite, tiredness, fever, nausea and vomiting, and pain in the joints.

Some people develop liver cancer or liver cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) later in life.

How is it transmitted?

Hepatitis C is spread through blood-to-blood contact. The most common way people become infected in Australia is by sharing drug injecting equipment.

Transmission also occurs through unsterilised tattoo and body piercing equipment and sharing personal items such as razors and toothbrushes.

Hepatitis C is not often sexually transmitted but there is still a risk involved, particularly if a woman is menstruating or if the skin is broken.

A woman with hepatitis C can also pass the virus onto her baby during childbirth.

The risk of infection via a blood transfusion in Australia is extremely low as all blood products are thoroughly screened.

How do I know if I have it?

Hepatitis C is detected by a blood test, but it can take some months from the time of infection before the virus shows up on the test. For this reason a re-test is often required.

Treatment/Management

There is no cure for hepatitis C, however antiviral medicines are available to help fight off the virus.

Around 20% of people get well, but around 80% become carriers of the virus for life. Eating a healthy diet, avoiding alcohol and generally taking care of yourself can help keep you healthy.

Prevention

Always use condoms and dams to reduce the risk of contracting hepatitis C.

Never share needles, other injecting equipment or personal items such as razors or toothbrushes as they can carry traces of infected blood. If getting a tattoo or body piercing make sure all equipment has been sterilised, and don't share other people's pierced earrings or body jewellery.

There is currently no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.

Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

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