

Treating Hepatitis C the new, simpler way

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that can seriously impact a person's health. It can cause cirrhosis of the liver, liver disease and liver cancer. In rare cases it can result in death. Hepatitis C is very infectious and is usually spread through blood to blood contact.

More than 300,000 Australians are thought to be infected with hepatitis C. Around 50,000 Australians don't even know they have the virus.

For some people who are infected, the virus is cleared by their immune system within months, however for the majority of people it is not cleared and they will progress to having chronic hepatitis C, which they could carry for life.

How do you contract hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is contracted through blood-to-blood contact with a person who has the virus. The most common way to become infected is by sharing needles, syringes or other medical equipment.

Infection rates are also higher in some migrant groups who contracted it before coming to Australia.

Less commonly, hepatitis C can also be spread:

- by getting a backyard tattoo, or home body piercing or scarification
- from a mother with hepatitis C to her newborn baby
- sharing razors and other items
- physical activity where blood-to-blood contact occurs.

Cases of hepatitis C being contracted through blood transfusion before 1990 have also been reported. As have cases of it being contracted through medical and dental procedures in the developing world.

You cannot contract hepatitis C from activities such as touching and kissing or sharing plates, clothes, toilets or showers with someone who has the virus.

Who should be tested?

Testing for hepatitis C is recommended for anyone who:

- has ever injected drugs, even if it was just once or many years ago
- has a backyard tattoo, or home body piercing or scarification
- had a blood transfusion prior to 1990
- had a medical or dental procedure in the developing world
- has been in prison

- has abnormal liver tests or liver disease
- was born to a mother with hepatitis C
- engaged in physical activity that involved blood-to-blood contact, such as combat sports.

People aged between 40 and 60 should consider if they may have been exposed to hepatitis C and discuss being tested with their doctor, at least once in their lifetime.

How do I get tested for hepatitis C?

Having blood tests is the only way to tell if you are infected with the hepatitis C virus. Blood tests can also show if there is any damage to the liver. The first test is for antibodies, the second test looks for the virus itself.

Visit your local GP to discuss if you should be tested and to organise blood tests.

Can I get vaccinated for hepatitis C?

No. A vaccine to prevent hepatitis C hasn't been developed.

How is hepatitis C treated?

New treatments for hepatitis became available on the PBS on 1 March 2016. The treatments provide many benefits including:

- a cure rate of 95 per cent
- a short period of treatment (8, 12 or 24 weeks)
- easy to use – tablets, no injections
- fewer side effects.

Who is eligible for the new treatments?

The medicines are available to all people over the age of 18 with chronic hepatitis C who are registered with Medicare. Patients will be eligible for the new medicines in line with the regulations outlined in the Commonwealth PBS Schedule. Your doctor will be able to advise if you meet these requirements and will manage your treatment and decide the most appropriate therapy option/s.

What do the new treatments involve?

A course of treatment takes 8 to 24 weeks, which is much shorter than previous treatments. The most common course lasts for 12 weeks. Patients now only need to take 1–2 tablets once or twice a day. Other patients may need to take up to three medicines at once. A small number of patients may need to use an injection and take tablets.

How can I access the new treatments?

Your GP can prescribe these medicines in consultation with a medical specialist. Specialists can prescribe these medicines independently.

Once your GP or specialist has prescribed the medicines, you can order them from your local chemist. Your chemist may already have the medicines in stock or may need to order it in, which may take a day or two to arrive.

More information

For more information on hepatitis C and how to get tested:

- contact your local GP or specialist
- visit health.qld.gov.au/hepc