

## HEPATITIS C

Hepatitis C (hep C) is a virus that affects the liver.

Most often, people get hep C from sharing injecting equipment – where infected blood from one person gets into another person's blood stream from the needle, syringe, water, filter or injection site.

One in four people infected with hep C will clear the virus naturally – but can get re-infected.

Three out of four will not clear the virus naturally and will have it for the rest of their lives unless they are treated and cured. This is known as chronic hep C.

## INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

A Needle and Syringe Program (NSP or the exchange) worker can give you information, help you find services and make appointments for you.

### DirectLine

1800 888 236 • [www.directline.org.au](http://www.directline.org.au)  
24-hour. If you want to talk to someone about your drug use or find a support service.

### Hep C Infoline

1800 703 003 • [www.hepvic.org.au](http://www.hepvic.org.au)  
Phone service that provides information, support and referrals.

### Better Health Channel

[www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)  
Health information and service directory.

### Hepatitis Victoria

[www.hepvic.org.au](http://www.hepvic.org.au)

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## CHRONIC HEP C

Your liver helps to keep you well by cleaning your blood and getting rid of toxins and poisons from your body. Chronic hep C can affect how well your liver works which can cause a lot of health problems over time. Some people may not notice any symptoms for many years, and so may not know they have it.

Hep C symptoms may not affect everyone the same way. They can include nausea, pain in your joints, fatigue, flu-like symptoms or weight loss.

A small percentage of people with chronic hep C will go on to develop cirrhosis of the liver, liver cancer or liver failure.

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There are now very effective treatments that can cure the virus. Around 95% of people who complete the new treatments are cured of hep C.

A Needle and Syringe Program (NSP or the exchange) worker can help you find a service that can help you get tested and treated for hep C.

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## HOW YOU GET HEP C

Most people get hep C from sharing injecting equipment. You can also get hep C from unsterilised tattoo or piercing equipment, toothbrushes, razor blades or through sharing 'tooters' and banknotes when snorting drugs. It's not usually transmitted through sex but there is also a small risk of hep C being transmitted during unprotected sex if there is infected blood present.

## AVOID GETTING HEP C

There is no vaccination for hep C, but it is preventable and treatable.

When you inject, use a new syringe and swabs.

Make sure the other equipment like the spoon and tourniquet are also clean.

Try to keep things as clean and sterile as you can.

Wash and swab your hands and fingertips before and after having a hit, and swab your spoon.

If you're sharing the gear, each of you should have your own new stuff and avoid sharing ANY injecting equipment. There are different strains of hep C – called genotypes. Even if you already have hep C, you could be infected with a different strain.

Be in control of your own drug use. Learn to inject yourself (self-inject) so you don't have to rely on others. If someone else is helping you inject, make sure they have washed their hands.

**Dispose of used equipment properly.**

## TESTING AND TREATMENTS

There are new treatments for hep C that many people find much more manageable than the older ones. Most people can be treated by a GP.

New hep c treatment:

- More effective
- Easy to take
- Fewer side effects
- Does not involve injections
- The same cost as other prescription charges
- You can have the treatment and keep using
- Often only one or two tablets a day for 8, 12 or 24 weeks.

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**Curing hep C starts with getting tested for it.**

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You'll need to make an appointment with a doctor, a nurse or clinic. A worker at an NSP should be able to help you with this or you can contact the Hep C Infoline on 1800 703 003. They can answer your questions, explain the testing process and help you decide what to do if you test positive for hep C.

Blood will be taken to find out if you've ever had hep C. The test results will show:

- You've never had hep C and do not need treatment
- You have had hep C, cleared it naturally and still have antibodies
- That you have the hep C virus and need treatment.

The person that gives you your results can explain your options for treatment.

Remember, treatment can cure you and clear the virus but you can be reinfected.

## MANAGING YOUR SYMPTOMS

**It's important to look after your health if you have hep C.**

- Look for a good GP who can help you stay healthy
- Learn as much as you can about treatment and staying healthy
- Alcohol damages your liver, so try to cut out alcohol or at least reduce the amount you drink.
- Try to eat well and exercise
- If you get another infection like hep B or HIV, things will get much more difficult and possibly affect your treatment options. Be careful: avoid sharing injecting equipment. Be blood aware: wherever there is a risk of you getting someone else's blood into your blood, take care!
- Get a free vaccination to protect you from getting hep B.

## DISCLOSURE

There are laws against treating someone differently or less favourably because they have hep C. This does not mean that discrimination does not occur, so you should prepare yourself for this and think carefully about who you tell that you have hep C.