



What is hep C?

Hepat - the latin word for liver.

Hepatitis - a condition where the liver is swollen or inflamed.

Hepatitis C - a type of hepatitis, which is different from hepatitis A or B.

What is hepatitis C?

- ⊖ **Hepatitis C** is a very serious disease that affects the functioning of the liver.
- ⊖ The **hep C** virus lives in the **blood**, and is transmitted when the **blood of an infected person enters the bloodstream of another**. **Blood to blood** contact is the only way **hepatitis C** is transmitted.

The most common ways that the hep C virus is transmitted in Australia today are:

- ⊖ Sharing injecting equipment (syringes and any equipment that may touch the injection site, eg tourniquet, spoons, fingers).
- ⊖ Unsterile tattooing or body piercing procedures.
- ⊖ Unsterile medical/ dental procedures.
- ⊖ From mother to child.
- ⊖ Blood transfusions **before** 1991.

What about sex?

Hepatitis C is only transmitted from blood to blood contact. It is not considered a sexually transmissible infection (STI), because it is not transmitted via other bodily fluids. In any case, **safer sex**, especially when blood is present (eg menstruation), is **always** the best practice.

People living with hepatitis C experience a range of symptoms and conditions

Roughly, of 100 people infected -

- >25 will **clear the virus** out of their bodies
- >75 will become **chronically infected**

Of those 75 -

- >20 will not develop liver damage or symptoms
- >45 will develop long term symptoms and liver damage (after 15 years)
- >7 will develop cirrhosis (after 30 years)
- >3 people will experience liver cancer or failure (after 25 years)



BEFORE GETTING A PIECE OF BODY ART

- ⊖ Make sure the body piercing/ tattooing studio is registered with the council.

- ⊖ Ask friends and acquaintances for recommendations.

- ⊖ Visit the studio and try and meet the body artist in person to discuss design and placement. They should be happy to talk with you about these things. Take a friend if you like.

- ⊖ Ask the artist about their knowledge and practice of infection control procedures. They should be willing and able to demonstrate this knowledge to you. IF they can't, or won't, then GO SOMEWHERE ELSE. Find a studio where these practices are valued.

- ⊖ Assess the general cleanliness and organisation of the studio. The piercing/ tattoo area should be separate from the main area of the studio, and should be very clean.

- ⊖ If possible observe the artist at work, do they:
 - ~ use and replace gloves if interrupted?
 - ~ open needle packs and other sterile equipment in front of the customer?
 - ~ clean and sterilise surfaces and equipment between clients (eg telephone)?

- ⊖ Call the Hepatitis C Council of Victoria 03 9380 4644 or 1800 703 003 (country callers) and ask to speak to someone about safe body art.

About the Council > The Hepatitis C Council of Victoria is a statewide organisation that provides hepatitis C education, referrals, advocacy, community support and resources to the Victorian community.

Contact the Council > Suite 5, 200 Sydney Road, Brunswick Victoria 3056
Telephone: (03) 9380 4644 Victorian Country Callers: 1800 703 003
Email: hepcvic@vicnet.net.au Web: www.hepcvic.org.au



Body art and hepatitis C: What are the risks?

Hepatitis C is a virus that attacks the liver. It is found in blood, and is transmitted when the blood of an infected person enters another person's bloodstream. There is no vaccination for hepatitis C and the pharmaceutical treatment for the virus is only successful for some people. The process of getting a body piercing or tattoo involves blood and results in an open wound being created. These conditions are perfect for the transmission of the hep C virus, as there is an opportunity for blood to blood contact to occur.

How to Protect Yourself

Body art practices, such as piercing and tattooing, can put you at risk of being exposed to hepatitis C, so it is important that you understand how you can protect yourself from this very serious virus. There are rules and guidelines that body artists (that is, body piercers and tattooists) should follow to prevent transmission of the hep C virus. While as a customer you would not be expected to know all these 'infection control' guidelines, a body artist should be happy to discuss with you the preventative measures they use in their practice. If a body artist is not confident in talking about infection control measures, you should seriously consider going somewhere else.

Sterilisation

Everything that is to be used during the tattooing or piercing procedure should be single use and new, or appropriately sterilised. Everything that the body artist is going to need during the process should be readily available and within reach. Needles are used in both piercings and tattoos. Single use needles should be opened from their packet in front of you, both to show that they're being used only once, and also to ensure that they remain sterile until the time they are needed in the procedure. If needles are not single use then they should be sterilised according to industry standards, and opened from their sterilisation package in front of you.

Blood Contamination

Hepatitis C can live outside the body for several days, and even a small, invisible amount of blood can contain enough viral load to pose a transmission risk. So there is more to safe body art than clean needles! Razors are often used to shave the area in preparation for a tattoo or piercing. These must also be single use. A razor may nick or cut the skin and, if the same razor nicks the skin of two different people, an opportunity for blood to blood contact arises. Anything the tattooist or piercer touches during the procedure comes into contact with blood. If for any reason the body artist has to break from the procedure, they should wash their hands and put on new gloves before resuming the work. The bench area, chair and other fixtures should be clean. Most tattooists and piercers cover chairs and benches with plastic, and their telephones and light fittings with cling film, which they change between appointments.



Body art and hepatitis C: What are the risks?

continued

Questions to Ask Prior to Having a Procedure

The Hepatitis C Council would advise anyone considering getting a tattoo or body piercing to consider (or ask about) the following:

- >> What is the practitioner's level of experience or training?
- >> Does the practitioner have an awareness of infection control and take steps to prevent the transmission of blood-borne viruses like hep C? An experienced and professional artist should be able and willing to discuss their infection control practices with you.
- >> Does the practitioner wash their hands? Do they use new gloves before starting a procedure? Do they change their gloves during the procedure if for any reason they are interrupted?
- >> Are sterilised or new needles, instruments and jewellery opened from their packets in your presence?

If you are seriously considering getting some sort of body art, or you know someone who is, it is really important to be blood aware. You could spend a long time deciding what body art you want: planning, designing, and saving up for your piercing or tattoo. It's just as important for you to think about what you DON'T want: and you DON'T want the hep C virus. When you talk to the body artist about all the finer points of body art, make it an opportunity to discuss infection control measures and other safety issues. Remember, if a tattooist or piercer seems uneasy about talking about infection control, or makes you feel uneasy asking about it, then you should seriously consider going elsewhere.

Prices for body art can vary quite a bit, and cheaper services aren't necessarily the safest. Never have any body art done unless you're sure it's safe, even if it means you have to wait a bit longer and save more cash. Having hep C could mean living with a serious illness for the rest of your life.

About the Council > The Hepatitis C Council of Victoria is a statewide organisation that provides hepatitis C education, referrals, advocacy, community support and resources to the Victorian community.

Contact the Council > Suite 5, 200 Sydney Road, Brunswick Victoria 3056
Telephone: (03) 9380 4644 Victorian Country Callers: 1800 703 003
Email: hepcvic@vicnet.net.au Web: www.hepcvic.org.au



hepatitis C

What exactly is it?

Hepatitis is the general name for several different illnesses which all cause the same problem: an inflamed (swollen or painful) liver. Hepatitis C is a virus that is present in blood. There is no vaccination against hep C, and the current treatment available is only successful for some people. It is a serious virus that some people will recover from, but most people will become chronically infected and have the virus long-term. A small number of people may develop liver cancer.

How is the Hep C virus transmitted?

The hep C virus can only be spread through blood-to-blood contact. This means that the blood of an infected person needs to enter the bloodstream of another. There are only a few ways this can happen: sharing injecting equipment; un-sterile tattooing, body piercing and acupuncture; un-sterile medical or dental procedures; and sharing items like razors, toothbrushes and nail scissors that sometimes come into contact with blood.

Aren't there other ways it can be spread?

Not easily. You can't get it from hugging, kissing, sharing crockery or utensils, mosquitoes, sneezing or coughing. Having said that, it is always a good idea to be very cautious if there is a blood spill. All blood should be treated as infectious, that is why there is a 'blood rule' in sport: just to be on the safe side. Hep C is not classified as a sexually transmitted infection. However, menstrual (period) blood really is blood, so if you are having sex, always be aware of any cuts or open wounds that might allow an opportunity for blood-to-blood contact to occur.

How do you know if you have it?

The reason why hep C is such a huge problem is that lots of people have the virus and don't know they have it. Most people who have hep C won't experience any symptoms until about 13 years after they contracted the virus. If you've ever shared any equipment used during injecting, you are at high risk of having been exposed to the hep C virus. You need to have a blood test to find out if you've been infected.

How do you avoid getting it?

Unlike HIV, the hep C virus is very strong and can live outside the body for several days. It is also a very small virus, and can be contained in tiny invisible amounts of blood, even on fingertips and tabletops.

SAFE BODY ART (TATTOOING AND PIERCING): Because tattooing and body piercing involve skin penetration and therefore blood, it is important to always use professional body art services. Not only should businesses be Health Department Approved, you should always choose a reputable body artist who can (and is happy to) demonstrate extensive knowledge and skill in safe and healthy body art.

DON'T SHARE INJECTING EQUIPMENT: Remember this always, even if you never need to know it. Never ever share needles, syringes, spoons, swabs, filters, tourniquets... ANYTHING at all. Never double dip, and always wash your hands before and after injecting.



hiv/aids

What exactly is it?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. The virus attacks the immune system, which is the body's defence against disease. People living with HIV (said to be HIV positive) can live for years feeling and looking healthy. Having HIV can result in Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), which is the name given to a collection of symptoms of life threatening conditions. A person develops AIDS because his/her immune system's ability to fight infections has been compromised by the HIV virus.

How is the HIV virus transmitted?

Unsafe sex and sharing injecting equipment are the two most common ways the HIV virus is transmitted. The HIV virus lives in blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk, and is spread when any of these fluids passes from an infected person into the bloodstream of another.

How do you know if you have it?

HIV antibodies can be detected by having a blood test at your doctor or at a sexual health clinic. Some people experience a flu-like sickness when they acquire the virus, and others do not. You are at risk of catching the HIV virus if you have unsafe sex or share injecting equipment.

How do you avoid getting it?

SAFER SEX: any kind of sex that doesn't allow semen, vaginal fluid or blood to pass from one person into the blood stream of another is safer sex. Safer sex is everyone's responsibility: whether you're male, female, HIV positive or HIV negative, straight, bi or gay. Always use a condom. If it's not on, it's not on!!

DON'T SHARE INJECTING EQUIPMENT: Remember this always, even if you never need to know it. Never ever share needles, syringes, spoons, swabs, tourniquets... ANYTHING at all. You were always taught to share. This is the exception. Drugs are dangerous enough without the added risk of contracting a serious virus.

How do you use a condom?

Check the use by date, and choose one that fits, as they come in different shapes and sizes. Practice with different condoms to get used to their feel. Squeeze the air out of the tip of the condom before rolling it all the way to the base of the penis. Put it on before any penetration actually happens. Use water-based lubricant (not oil based!!) on the outside of the condom... and remember to hold the base of the condom when withdrawing to keep it on.

About the Council > The Hepatitis C Council of Victoria is a statewide organisation that provides hepatitis C education, referrals, advocacy, community support and resources to the Victorian community.

Contact the Council > Suite 5, 200 Sydney Road, Brunswick Victoria 3056
Telephone: (03) 9380 4644 Victorian Country Callers: 1800 703 003
Email: hepcvic@vicnet.net.au Web: www.hepcvic.org.au