

Testing for hepatitis C

Being tested for hepatitis C will help you make informed decisions about your health, lifestyle and treatment options. If you know you have hepatitis C, you can take steps to reduce its impact on your health and prevent harm to yourself and other people.

It's your decision whether or not to be tested for hepatitis C. Listed below are the ways the virus is transmitted. If you think any of these apply to you, consider being tested for hepatitis C.

Shared drug injecting equipment (high risk)

If you have ever shared any drug injecting equipment including syringes, needles, tourniquets, swabs, water or spoons, you may have contracted hepatitis C. If you have injected drugs over a long period of time, or used to, you may have contracted hepatitis C more than once.

Blood transfusion and receipt of blood products (prior to 1990 medium risk, after 1990 extremely low risk)

Up to 10% of people with hepatitis C contracted the virus through blood transfusions or receiving blood products in Australia prior to 1990. Since 1990, all blood and blood products have been screened for hepatitis C.

Tattoos, body piercing and skin penetration (medium risk)

A small number of people may have become infected with hepatitis C through unsterile tattooing or body piercing procedures.

Occupational needlestick or sharps injury (low risk)

There is a small risk of a worker getting hepatitis C from a sharps injury or needlestick injury that involves infected blood.

Pregnancy and childbirth (low risk)

Studies show that up to 5% of babies may acquire the virus from a mother who has hepatitis C during birth.

Sex (extremely low risk)

Hepatitis C is rarely transmitted through sexual activity, but if one of the partners has hepatitis C and blood-to-blood contact occurs during sex, then transmission is possible.

Other ways of transmitting hepatitis C

Not all countries have the same infection control procedures as Australia. Mass vaccination programs that have not used sterile equipment and other unsafe medical practices, particularly in some overseas countries (variable risk) have resulted in people being infected with hepatitis C.

What is the test for hepatitis C?

When looking for the hepatitis C virus, the first step is usually a blood test called a hepatitis C antibody test.

Your body produces antibodies when you are infected with the hepatitis C virus. With your permission, your doctor takes a sample of your blood and sends it to a laboratory for testing to see if you have these antibodies. It can take a week or two before the test results are sent back to your doctor. Make an appointment with the doctor to receive your test results in person. Your doctor should explain the test results; answer your questions and recommend follow-up appointments if necessary.

Following infection, it can take two to three months for antibodies to appear in your blood. This is known as the 'window period'. During this time, antibody testing may not provide an accurate result because the antibodies may not have developed enough in your bloodstream to be detected.

A positive antibody test means that you have at some time contracted the hepatitis C virus but it does not mean that you still have it. About 25% of all people who contract hepatitis C, clear it naturally through their own immune response.

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If you test positive for hepatitis C antibodies, a further test called a PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test can be carried out to see if you still have the hepatitis C virus, and if so, which genotype (strain) and how much of the virus is in your blood (viral load). A PCR test can be carried out 3 weeks after exposure and a positive PCR test result means that you have the hepatitis C virus.

Pre-test discussion

The pre-test discussion tries to ascertain whether you have ever been at risk of being exposed to hepatitis C and what a positive test result may mean for you. The pre-test discussion should not be rushed and the person doing the test should discuss with you:

- how hepatitis C is transmitted and how to prevent transmission
- what the hepatitis C antibody or PCR test is and the benefits of being tested
- the clinical signs and symptoms that has led them to believe that you may have been exposed to the virus
- what can happen to your body if you have hepatitis C, and what your treatment options are if you receive a positive test result
- describe the window period and the possibility of false test results
- clearly explain the terms used in giving test results
- the information you need to be able to decide to have the test or not (informed consent)
- the services available to you
- implications of a positive test result for health and/or life insurance
- confidentiality, including the legal requirements for disclosing hepatitis C status and what happens to the test result
- how you may react to a positive result.

If you haven't had this discussion with your doctor you can call the Hep C Infoline 1800 703 003 to discuss these subjects.

Post-test counselling (giving test results)

People react to finding out they have hepatitis C in different ways – some feel angry, confused or depressed, while others feel nothing at all. Not everyone feels the same when they are diagnosed, but everyone is affected emotionally one way or the other.

If your test comes back positive, the doctor should go through the pre-test discussion points again and answer any questions that you have. Some of the areas that should be discussed include:

- factual information about the meaning of a positive test result
- the availability of further testing to work out if you have cleared the virus or if you are chronically infected with hepatitis C
- your immediate support and information needs
- safe behaviour information, including making sure that you understand how hepatitis C is transmitted
- how and when to disclose to other people that you have hepatitis C
- hepatitis C treatment options
- strategies for living with hepatitis C.

Sometimes getting a positive test result can feel overwhelming; you may need time to think through the impact of having hepatitis C. You can call the Hep C Infoline on 1800 703 003 to talk about your concerns, or to have written information about hepatitis C sent to you.

Useful contacts

Hepatitis C Victoria

Hep C Infoline 1800 703 003

Office telephone: (03) 9380 4644

Email: info@hepcvic.org.au

Web: www.hepcvic.org.au

Useful publications

Impact

Available from Hepatitis C Victoria

This infosheet is intended as a general guide only. It is not intended to replace expert or medical advice.

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