

Hepatitis C



In 2022/2023, people born between 1969 and 1989 are eligible for free screening



What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the HCV virus. It can be a mild disease, that clears up in a few weeks, but it can also remain asymptomatic for years. People who are infected can develop chronic liver disease, which may evolve into very serious and progressive forms, such as cirrhosis and liver cancer.



How it is transmitted

The hepatitis C virus is transmitted by contact with blood from an infected person. This can occur:

- **At birth**
Approximately 6% of infants born to infected mothers will contract hepatitis C.
- **By sharing needles and syringes**
Today, most people become infected with hepatitis C by sharing needles, syringes or any other equipment used to prepare and inject substances.
- **Through sexual intercourse with an infected person**
Hepatitis C can be transmitted during sexual intercourse with an infected person, through small wounds in the genital area. This form of transmission is uncommon, but can still be prevented by using condoms.
- **By getting unsafe tattoos or piercings**
Hepatitis c can spread when people get tattoos or piercings in unlicensed facilities, informal settings or with non-sterile instruments.
- **By sharing personal items**
People can become infected by using razors, nail clippers, nail scissors, toothbrushes and other items that may have come into contact with infected blood, even in trace amounts not visible to the naked eye.
- **In healthcare settings**
It doesn't happen often, but people can get infected in healthcare settings. Healthcare professionals themselves are at higher risk of infection than the general population. Nowadays, the risk of transmission during blood transfusions and organ transplants is extremely low.

Hepatitis C **IS NOT TRANSMITTED** by sharing cutlery, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, holding hands, coughing or sneezing, or using shared toilets, bathrooms and saunas. It is also not spread through food or water.



What are the symptoms of acute hepatitis C?

Yellowing of the skin and eyes, lack of appetite, stomachache, vomiting, fever, dark urine, light-coloured stools, joint pain and tiredness.

Many people recently infected with the hepatitis C virus show no symptoms, do not look sick or feel ill and are therefore unaware that they are infected. Even in the absence of symptoms, people may find out that they have hepatitis C 2-12 weeks after contact with the virus.



What are the symptoms of chronic (long-term) hepatitis C?

Most people with chronic hepatitis C have no symptoms or only experience general symptoms such as chronic fatigue and depression. Chronic liver disease in people with hepatitis C usually develops slowly, without any signs or symptoms for many years.

Many people eventually develop chronic liver disease, which can evolve into very serious and progressive forms ranging from cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) to liver cancer.

People who are positive for the virus can always spread it, even when they have no symptoms.



The Importance of Screening

Screening is the only way to detect chronic hepatitis C, as it often presents no symptoms or only general symptoms. It is carried out by means of a simple blood test and helps prevent complications of the disease, because it allows the identification of unknown infections and the provision of early treatment. In 2022, people born between 1969 and 1989 are eligible for free screening.



How the treatment works

There is an effective drug therapy that is easy to take, safe and extremely successful. Approximately 95% of those treated recover completely by eliminating the infection.



It is useful to know that:

There is currently no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection; therefore, adopting hygiene measures to avoid contact with contaminated blood is the only available form of prevention.

For further information, please contact your family doctor.