Hepatitis C: information for patients
About Public Health England

Public Health England exists to protect and improve the nation’s health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities. We do this through world-leading science, knowledge and intelligence, advocacy, partnerships and the delivery of specialist public health services. We are an executive agency of the Department of Health and Social Care, and a distinct delivery organisation with operational autonomy. We provide government, local government, the NHS, Parliament, industry and the public with evidence-based professional, scientific and delivery expertise and support.

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What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C, also called HepC or HCV, is a virus carried in the blood which infects and damages the liver. Viruses are so small you can’t see them with your eyes and live in our cells.

What does hepatitis C do to your liver?

It causes inflammation in the liver that leads, very slowly, to damage and eventually this forms scars. This is called fibrosis and in most people with hepatitis C it takes many, many years to develop and people often don’t know it is happening. Over time, usually 30 years, this can lead to cirrhosis of the liver.

What is cirrhosis?

The liver becomes scarred and hard instead of being smooth, bumps form and the shape of the liver changes. This causes changes to the way blood flows through the liver and can lead to bleeding into the stomach from diverted blood. In cirrhosis your liver starts to run out of normal cells and can stop working – also known as liver failure. Not everyone with hepatitis C also has cirrhosis and for those people that do it usually takes many years of infection for it to develop. Cirrhosis can also lead to liver cancer.

What is liver failure?

The liver stops working, people feel some or all of the following:

- feeling constantly tired and having no energy (fatigue),
- yellow colouring of the skin and the whites of the eyes (jaundice)
- confusion or brain fog – not being able to remember simple things (hepatic encephalopathy),
- fluid retention in the stomach and ankles (ascites at the abdomen, oedema)
- internal bleeding (major bleeding from swollen veins in the gullet (varices)

Can liver failure be cured?

For some people a liver transplant (new liver) will cure liver failure, talk to your nurse or doctor. For others it cannot be cured.
What does your liver do?

Your liver has 100s and 100s of jobs – including fighting infections and diseases, removing waste products, cleaning your blood, producing lots of substances including hormones, proteins and enzymes which your body uses to keep you well and repair itself.

Can your liver repair itself?

Yes, if there is a small to medium amount of damage, if there is a very large amount of damage – no. For those people with very large amounts of damage a liver transplant may be an option, speak to a nurse or doctor.

I have Hepatitis C, what treatment do I need?

Your doctor will give you some tablets to take for up to 12 weeks – some tablets only need to be taken for 8 weeks. Make sure you take all of your tablets otherwise the drugs may not work properly and you could still have the disease.

Why are there different sorts of tablets?

There are at least 6 different types of hepatitis C and the doctor will give you the tablets which will most likely cure you. Most people don’t have any or very few side effects.

Do the drugs work for everybody all of the time?

Not quite, they work for around 9 out of 10 people.

What happens if they don’t work for me?

There may be other treatment options, speak to your nurse or doctor.

How will I know if the drugs worked?

A blood test will show whether or not the virus is still present. The nurse or doctor will take one blood test after your last treatment and another blood test 12 or 24 weeks after that. Your nurse or doctor will also have a chat about helping you not to become re-infected.

How did I get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood borne virus which means you came into contact with blood from someone else with the disease. It only takes a very small amount of blood (so small
you can’t see it with your eye) for the virus to transfer e.g. on a razor or a toothbrush. Other ways include:

- through open cuts, wounds or scratches
- if you had a blood transfusion or blood product prior to 1991 (after this all blood is screened)
- sexual transmission if you pass on blood during sex
- from infected mothers to babies
- dental treatment, injections, or tattoos if done with unsterilised equipment – mainly abroad
- injecting drugs (including steroids)
- sharing any drug injecting equipment e.g. needles, tourniquets, etc.

Is there anyone I can contact for help?

Yes, your GP or if you don’t want them to know or don’t have a GP, The Hepatitis C Trust is staffed by people who have all had the disease and can offer you help and support. Their telephone number is: **0845 223 4424** and their web address is [hepctrust.org.uk](http://hepctrust.org.uk). The British Liver Trust can also help – their telephone number is **0800 652 7330** and their web address is [britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://britishlivertrust.org.uk).

I think I may have hepatitis C, how do I find out whether I do or not?

You need a blood test. Visit a GP or if you don’t have one or don’t want them to know GUM clinics offer walk in services with no need to have a GP. If you attend community drug services they can also do the blood test. The Hepatitis C Trust can also advise on how to get a test in your local area. Their telephone number is: **0845 223 4424** and their web address is [hepctrust.org.uk](http://hepctrust.org.uk).

Can I get rid of the virus without treatment?

Yes, around 1 in 5 people need no treatment and can get rid of hepatitis C on their own. Make sure you are tested with a blood test to check.

I’ve had a positive blood test for hepatitis C, but I don’t have it now, why is that?

For most people this means they have had the virus and cleared it. Your doctor will make sure that the correct test was done to check that you do not have hepatitis C now, as some tests for hepatitis C stay positive even after you clear the virus.

Do I need to tell people I’ve got hepatitis C?

You need to tell anyone who could come into contact with your blood and could also be infected. Speak to a nurse/doctor or The Hepatitis C Trust who will help you.