



Hepatitis C

and your liver

Hepatitis C, also called HepC or HCV, is a virus carried in the blood which infects and attacks the liver and can be fatal.

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.

What does hepatitis C do to your liver?

It causes inflammation in the liver that leads, very slowly, to damage which eventually forms scars. This is called fibrosis and in most people with hepatitis C it takes many years to develop without symptoms so people often don't know it is happening. Over time, usually up to 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 changes the way blood flows through the liver and can lead to bleeding into the gut. Cirrhosis can also lead to liver cancer.

When cirrhosis develops, your liver starts to run out of normal cells and can stop working – also known as liver failure.

Can your liver repair itself?

Yes, if there is a small to medium amount of damage. However, if there is a large amount of damage from severe cirrhosis or cancer, the liver cannot repair itself.

When there is a large amount of irreversible liver damage, a liver transplant (new liver) may be an option – this would be discussed with your doctor or nurse.

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))



Hepatitis C

diagnosis and treatment

Hepatitis C is curable in most people. A simple blood test will tell you if you have the infection.

I have Hepatitis C, what treatment do I need?

Your doctor will give you some tablets to take for up to 12 weeks. Make sure you take all of your tablets otherwise the drugs may not work properly and you could still have the infection.

Do the drugs work for everybody all of the time, and what happens if they don't work for me?

The treatments work in around 9 out of 10 people. If initial treatments aren't successful, there are other treatment options that your doctor or nurse will discuss with you.

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 usually 12 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 your blood came into contact with infected blood from someone 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 product before 1986 or a blood transfusion 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

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

You need a blood test. Visit your 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. See their contact details below.

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. Around 1 in 5 people get rid of hepatitis C spontaneously, without any treatment.

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.

Is there anyone I can contact for advice?

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.

☎ 0207 089 6221

@ helpline@heptrust.org.uk

🌐 hepctrust.org.uk

The British Liver Trust can also help

☎ 0800 652 7330

🌐 britishlivertrust.org.uk



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