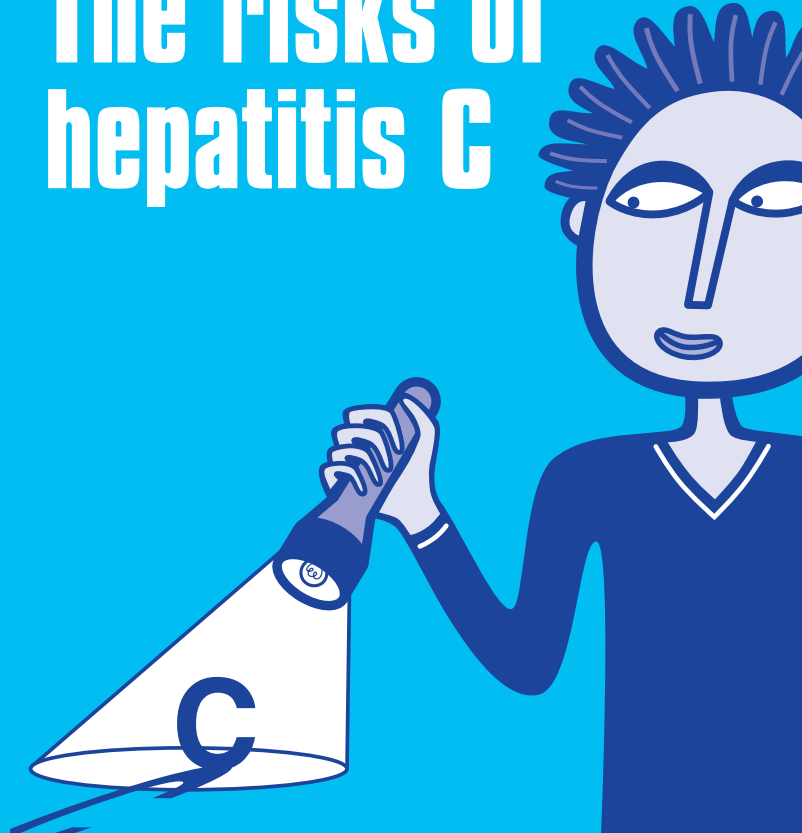




# The risks of hepatitis C



The HIV and sexual health charity for life

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This booklet is part of a range of publications produced by Terrence Higgins Trust to support you in living well with HIV. Most of the publications are designed to be suitable for you whatever your race, nationality, gender or sexuality.

**This booklet is for you if you are living with HIV and have concerns about getting hepatitis C. Using the information provided you may find it easier to decide whether hepatitis C is something that you need to be concerned about. This leaflet will also help you if you know that you have hepatitis C, and want to find out more.**

## What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis is a general term, which means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis C is a viral infection that can damage the liver and stop it from working properly. Hepatitis C is also known as Hep C or HCV.

Hepatitis A, B and C are three different viruses, and C is often the most damaging.

## How is it transmitted?

The main way that hepatitis C is passed from one person to another is through blood to blood contact, where the blood of a person infected with hepatitis C gets into the bloodstream of an uninfected person. For example, this can happen through:

- **Sharing needles and drug injecting equipment:** This is the most common way hepatitis C is transmitted. To reduce the risk, nothing used for injection (syringes, filters, swabs, water, drug mix etc.) should be shared.
- **Tattoos and piercings done with unsterilised equipment**
- **Receiving a blood transfusion or blood products:** In the UK, these are now screened for hepatitis C, and so are safe.
- **From mother to child, during pregnancy and childbirth:** The main risk is during delivery and labour, not breastfeeding.
- **Sex:** See the next page.



## Sexual transmission

Transmission of hepatitis C between heterosexuals is thought to be uncommon, but it does happen between gay men, especially men with HIV.

Sexual practices that could involve contact with blood are thought to have the biggest risk of hepatitis C transmission. These include fisting, using sex toys, unprotected anal sex and rimming.

Many gay men who have picked up hepatitis C have been involved in sex parties or sex clubs. It's easy for there to be invisible traces of blood on anything that has been in the arse of one man, and is then put in the arse of a second man. This could be a sex toy, a fist, an arm or a penis – even one that is covered with a condom. To prevent transmission, thorough cleaning and sterilisation is necessary. It's also recommended not to share containers of lubricant.

**Semen (*cum*)** – It is not known whether there is enough hepatitis C in semen for it to be passed on. It's possible that men with both HIV and hepatitis C have higher levels, which may be infectious.

**Vaginal fluids** – It's also not known whether there is enough hepatitis C to be passed on.

## More on transmission

Hepatitis C is a very stable and infectious virus and can survive outside the body in dry blood for up to three months. This is why it is important that needles and any other equipment used for tattooing, piercing and dental work is properly sterilised. It is possible that razors or toothbrushes might contain traces of blood, so it might be possible to catch hepatitis C from sharing these with a person who has hepatitis C.

You can't catch hepatitis C from sharing everyday equipment like plates, glasses and cutlery or by sharing a toilet.

## Can I be vaccinated against hepatitis C?

No. Unlike hepatitis A and B, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C. This is why it is important that you try and protect yourself against becoming infected, or infecting others if you have hepatitis C.

Vaccination against hepatitis A and B is usually recommended for people with HIV.

## How do I know if I have hepatitis C?

Your doctor can give you a blood test to look for hepatitis C antibodies in your blood. This will show if you have been exposed to the virus. A further blood test (a viral load test) might be used to confirm infection. If you have the hepatitis C virus, your doctor will do a liver function test and you may be offered a liver scan to see if there has been any liver damage as a result of having hepatitis C.

## What happens if you become infected with hepatitis C?

About one in five people who become infected with hepatitis C manage to get rid of the infection without any treatment. For those who don't clear the infection, how the disease progresses can differ dramatically from person to person. Factors such as how old a person is when they become infected, alcohol consumption and having HIV can speed up the development of hepatitis C disease. But it is quite unpredictable how the disease will progress.

## What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people do not get any symptoms at the time of their infection and some people never get any symptoms at all. This means that many people have hepatitis C and don't realise it. The lack of symptoms does not mean that the hepatitis C virus is not causing damage to your liver.

If a person does develop symptoms, they can include:

- **tiredness**
- **depression**
- **skin problems** (such as bruising)
- **jaundice** (the yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- **problems sleeping**
- **pain in the abdomen**
- **nausea**
- **water retention in legs and abdomen**
- **mental confusion**

Diagnosis of hepatitis C can be difficult because symptoms such as feeling depressed, feeling sick, tiredness and problems sleeping are often confused with other illnesses.

## What are the long term effects?

Most people with chronic hepatitis C will live a normal lifespan, but if hepatitis C is left untreated it can go on to cause severe liver damage and can even be fatal. In those people that go on to develop liver problems, damage begins with inflammation of the liver and can go on to fibrosis (scarring) of the liver, fat accumulation around the liver and cirrhosis (excessive scarring). This is associated with severely impaired liver function. A few people may develop liver cancer.

## Could hepatitis C be a problem for me?

Between 5% and 8% of people with HIV in the UK are co-infected with hepatitis C. Because there is no vaccine against hepatitis C, it is important to protect yourself from catching it.

Hepatitis C can cause serious damage to your liver, making it difficult for your liver to cope with your HIV medication and can make your HIV medication less effective. Having hepatitis C can reduce your HIV treatment options, and there may be greater risk of developing side effects.

HIV makes hepatitis more serious – the speed that hepatitis C can damage the liver can be greater and the damage more severe.

## How is it treated?

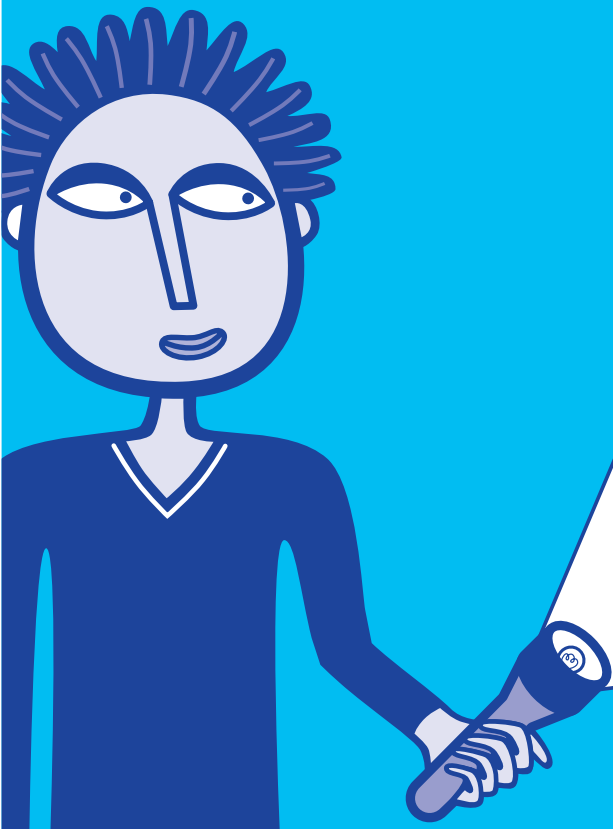
Usually you will only be treated for hepatitis C if it has started to affect your liver, to try and improve the health of your liver and to prevent further damage to it. Treatment for people with HIV usually lasts for 6 to 12 months.

The treatment is normally Ribavirin (a pill taken daily) plus Pegylated Interferon (a weekly injection). Side effects of this treatment can be unpleasant and can include joint pain, flu-like symptoms and depression. During treatment you will be advised to avoid alcohol. You may also be advised against smoking, taking recreational drugs or eating fatty food.

Around half of people treated will clear the virus, although that figure is improving over time as treatment gets better. Successful treatment does not make you immune to hepatitis C – you can become re-infected if you come into contact with the hepatitis C virus again. If treatment is unsuccessful, treatment can be tried again.

The treatment for hepatitis C has to be balanced with any anti-HIV drugs that you may be taking and this can be organised by you and your doctor. Because of this, it's important to be treated by a doctor who has good knowledge of both hepatitis C and HIV, or two doctors that will work closely together to make sure that you receive the best treatment. Some hospitals have specific 'co-infection' clinics for people with both HIV and hepatitis C.

**Further information about hepatitis,  
transmission and treatment can be found  
on these websites.**



[www.hepinfo.org](http://www.hepinfo.org)

[www.i-base.info](http://www.i-base.info)

[www.hepctrust.org.uk](http://www.hepctrust.org.uk)

[www.hepc.nhs.uk](http://www.hepc.nhs.uk)

[www.aidsmap.com](http://www.aidsmap.com)

[www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk)

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