

## Staying Healthy with Hepatitis C

It is possible to remain well for a long time even if a lot of your liver is affected. If you look after your liver it may cope better. You may stay well for longer and symptoms may improve. You can help yourself stay well and improve your chance of reducing your symptoms by:

- Stopping drinking alcohol completely or reviewing your intake, reducing it to within the safe limits advised by your doctor. Consuming alcohol can be damaging for your liver with or without hepatitis C
- Following a healthy diet, this includes plenty of fruit and vegetables and low fat foods
- Drinking plenty of water and cutting down on your caffeine intake
- Managing your stress levels! Reducing the amount of stress in your life will help you feel well

## Getting a diagnosis

If you are concerned that you may have hepatitis C, you can get tested at your GP practice or local hospital (GUM department). If you get tested at your GP, this information will be noted on your medical records, regardless of the result. A confirmed positive test result should then lead to a referral to a Hepatologist or a Gastroenterologist. They will then assess your medical needs. (A separate leaflet re testing is available)

Further information and support around HIV and Viral Hepatitis is available from:

### The Eddystone Trust (Plymouth)

36 Looe Street  
Bretonside  
Plymouth  
PL4 0EB  
Tel: 01752 25707

### The Eddystone Trust (Torbay)

24 Braddons Hill Road West  
Torquay  
TQ1 1BG  
Tel: 01803 380692

### Useful Websites:

The Eddystone Trust  
[www.eddystone.org.uk](http://www.eddystone.org.uk)

+ve  
[www.plusve.org](http://www.plusve.org)



The British Liver Trust  
[www.britishlivertrust.org.uk](http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk)

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## An Introduction

### About this leaflet

This leaflet provides you with an overview of hepatitis C. It outlines what the virus is, how it can be transmitted, ways of reducing the risk of becoming infected, and how to stay as healthy as possible after being diagnosed. If you have concerns about hepatitis C you should seek advice from a qualified health professional.

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood borne viral infection that attacks the liver, which is one of the largest organs in the body. It can only be passed on if tiny amounts of blood get into someone's bloodstream. The most common way for this to happen is through sharing contaminated injecting equipment or through unscreened blood transfusions. (Blood products have been screened for hepatitis C in this country since September 1991.)

Hepatitis simply means 'inflamed liver'. The liver has more than 500 functions, including helping to process food and toxins. If someone has hepatitis C the liver may not be able to perform those functions properly.

Hepatitis C has only been known about since 1989. We know a certain amount about the virus, but it is common to receive conflicting information.

## What are the symptoms?

Many people with hepatitis C have no symptoms whilst others report a variety of symptoms, some of which can be caused by other things. Depression, for instance, is common in people with a physical illness.

Symptoms can include:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Tiredness
- Bowel irregularities
- Frequent / continuous headaches
- 'Brain fog' (problems with concentration and memory)

These symptoms are commonly reported and may not be directly related to hepatitis C or liver damage. If you know you have hepatitis C and develop these symptoms, you should consult your doctor, reminding them of your condition. This is confidential information and should only be told to people who need to know.

## What does Hepatitis C do?

Some people with hepatitis C recover fully. Others, however, will develop chronic infection. This means it continues over time and could cause serious liver damage. Many people may be unaware of their status, as they may not experience symptoms.

Liver inflammation is fairly common for people who have had hepatitis C infection for a number of years. It is important to be in regular contact with a consultant, who will be able to assess liver damage by undertaking a liver biopsy (in some cases) and carrying out regular blood tests. Ideally, you should be linked in with either a Hepatologist or a Gastroenterologist, and you should also have access to a Nurse Specialist, who should be able to answer any questions you may have.

Treatment (medical) for hepatitis C could be an option for some people. Treatment usually involves taking a combination of 2 drugs, one of which you will have to inject. This usually lasts between 24 weeks and 48 weeks. The treatment can clear the virus and alleviate symptoms, for some, and prevent further liver damage. It does, however, cause side effects for the majority of people. You may be eligible for treatment, but factors such as age, current drug or alcohol use, mental health and gender may affect this decision. (A separate leaflet re treatment options is available)

Chronic (long term) infection can lead to permanent scarring, which is known as Fibrosis. If the whole liver becomes fibrosed, then this is known as 'Cirrhosis of the liver'. This can take years to develop and will not affect everyone with chronic hepatitis C. If you develop cirrhosis, you risk developing liver failure or in some cases primary liver cancer ("hepatocellular carcinoma").

## Preventing Hepatitis C

Because hepatitis C is mainly passed through blood, there are things you can do to avoid becoming infected or transmitting the virus.

For people who inject/use drugs these include:

- Avoid sharing needles, syringes, filters, swabs, spoons, water, tourniquets and all other paraphernalia
- Access needle exchanges
- Do not share straws if you snort drugs (as blood could be present from damaged nasal membranes)

The risk of passing hepatitis C in any other way is believed to be low. Activities to be cautious about, however, include:

- Tattooing and piercing - always go to a reputable tattooist / piercer and never share needles if doing it yourself
- Penetrative sex without a condom (vaginal or anal sex), particularly if there is blood involved / or if you already have a sexually transmitted infection

NB It is also possible for a mother to pass it on to her unborn child, although this is considered to be a low risk.

## How do I avoid infecting others?

If you have hepatitis C, it is important to follow these guidelines to protect other people:

- Do not lend any of your injecting equipment to others. This includes filters, water, spoons, lighters, needles, syringes and tourniquets
- Clean up your blood-spills from surfaces with brand-name bleach (follow instructions on the bottle carefully)
- Cuts and wounds - keep clean and cover with a waterproof dressing or plaster
- It is not advisable to share razors, toothbrushes and other personal items
- Use a condom for penetrative sex
- Do not carry an organ donor card or give blood