



Hepatitis C
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Information About Testing

About this leaflet

This leaflet contains information on hepatitis C and the testing process. It is aimed at enabling you to make an informed decision about whether to get tested or not. 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, which might cause fatigue. For some people this may lead to serious liver disease. Alcohol consumption and other drug use may speed up this process.

Many people with hepatitis C have no symptoms whilst others report a variety of symptoms, such as tiredness, nausea and vomiting, abdominal pain, frequent / continuous headaches. Some of these symptoms can be caused by other things, depression, for instance, is common in people with a physical illness. Experiencing any of these symptoms does not necessarily mean that the liver is damaged.

Am I at risk of having Hepatitis C?

Because hepatitis C is mainly passed through blood, below is a list of activities that may present a risk of transmitting the virus:

- Sharing needles and other equipment used in the injection process. This includes syringes, spoons, water, filters and swabs
- Having a blood transfusion prior to 1991 in the UK
- Tattooing and piercing
- Sharing tubes used for snorting drugs (e.g. cocaine)
- Sexual activity that involves blood

(See our introduction to hepatitis C for further information)

How do I find out if I have Hepatitis C?

It will take between 3 and 6 months from the time you were at risk before you are able to go for a test. This is called the 'window period'. This is how long it can take for the tests to be accurate. During this time it is important not to put yourself at risk anymore.

To find out whether you have hepatitis C, you may need to have two separate blood tests.

The first test (the antibody test) looks for hepatitis C antibodies. This shows whether you have ever been exposed to hepatitis C. It does not tell you if you still have the virus.

A negative antibody test result can mean you do not have hepatitis C. It may also mean, however, that you have not waited long enough before having a test.

If this result comes back positive, you will need a second blood test, a 'PCR' test, which will show whether you still have hepatitis C.

Negative PCR

If the PCR test comes back negative, it means you do not have the virus. It might mean that you had the infection in the past but have cleared it naturally. You may still need to be monitored by your healthcare worker.

Positive PCR

If this result comes back positive, you have what is called 'chronic infection', (long-term infection). At this point you should be linked in with a Hepatologist or a Gastroenterologist. You may also be linked in with a nurse specialist, who will be able to answer any questions you may have. You will be seen every six / twelve months for monitoring. Blood tests will be taken to look at things such as liver function. The consultant may also want to perform other procedures, like a liver biopsy and consider treatment options.

Looking after yourself and others

Whether your tests come back as positive or negative, it is important to avoid risky practices in the future:

- If you use drugs, avoid sharing needles, syringes, filters, swabs, spoons, water, tourniquets and all other paraphernalia
- Tattooing and piercing - always go to a reputable tattooist / piercer and never share needles if doing it yourself
- It is not advisable to share razors, toothbrushes and other personal items
- Use condoms for penetrative sex (vaginal or anal)
- Clean up blood spills with care, using good brand name bleach to wipe down surfaces
- Cuts and wounds - keep clean and cover with a waterproof dressing or plaster
- Do not share straws / snorting tubes when snorting drugs

What do I need to know before I agree to a test?

You may have to wait a couple of weeks to receive the test results. It is important you seek support in the meantime, should you need to. This may be from family / friends, from the testing centre or another agency.

Other points:

- The test will involve taking samples of blood. If you have 'difficult' veins, you should discuss this with the person taking the samples
- You might be called back to have more samples of blood taken before you get an accurate result
- The testing might involve screening for HIV and hepatitis B as well (with your consent)
- If you test positive for hepatitis C, this may affect life insurance policies or mortgages
- It's worth asking where any information about yourself may be recorded and who will have access to it

Knowing your status may give you the opportunity to take control of your health and stay well.

Where can I get a test?

Hepatitis C can be diagnosed in a number of settings, such as a GP surgery, sexual health clinic or GUM clinics.

If you chose to go to your GP and request a test for hepatitis C, this information will then be kept on your medical records, regardless of the result.

Your local GUM clinic is a confidential service, although your GP may be notified if you test positive. You will need to ask about this before you consent to the test as some areas do vary about informing your GP.

Your choice

Ultimately, it is up to you whether or not you test for hepatitis C. If you do decide to be tested, it is important you feel ready both to go through the testing process and also to be able to deal with the result.

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 257077

The Eddystone Trust (Torbay)

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

Useful Websites:

The Eddystone Trust

www.eddystone.org.uk

The British Liver Trust

www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

+ve

www.plusve.org



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