

# What you need to know about hepatitis C

## What is hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection.
- Around 70% of people infected with HCV will develop chronic hepatitis, which may lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer.
- Newly acquired HCV infection is mostly asymptomatic. Some people with acute HCV infection may exhibit symptoms indistinguishable from hepatitis of other causes, such as fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, upper abdominal discomfort, tea-coloured urine and jaundice (yellowing of skin and the whites of eyes).
- Hepatitis C can remain asymptomatic until decades after infection, when signs and symptoms develop secondary to serious liver damage.

## How is hepatitis C transmitted?

- Contact with blood or body fluids of an infected person
  - Sharing needles, syringes or other equipment for injecting drugs
  - Reusing inadequately sterilised medical equipment
  - Transfusion of unscreened blood and blood products
  - Occupational exposure to blood or body fluid with HCV in healthcare setting
- Sexual contact
  - Sexual transmission of HCV can occur if both partners have skin or mucosal lesions and do not use condoms during sex, especially during sexual practices that lead to exposure to blood.
  - The risk of sexual transmission of HCV increases among men who have sex with men, HIV-positive people and those who have sexually transmitted infection.
- Mother-to-child transmission (MTCT)
  - The estimated risk of MTCT is about 4 - 8%.
  - Currently, there is no proof that breastfeeding can transmit HCV. However, if there is nipple crack and bleeding, breastfeeding should be stopped until the cracked nipples are healed.

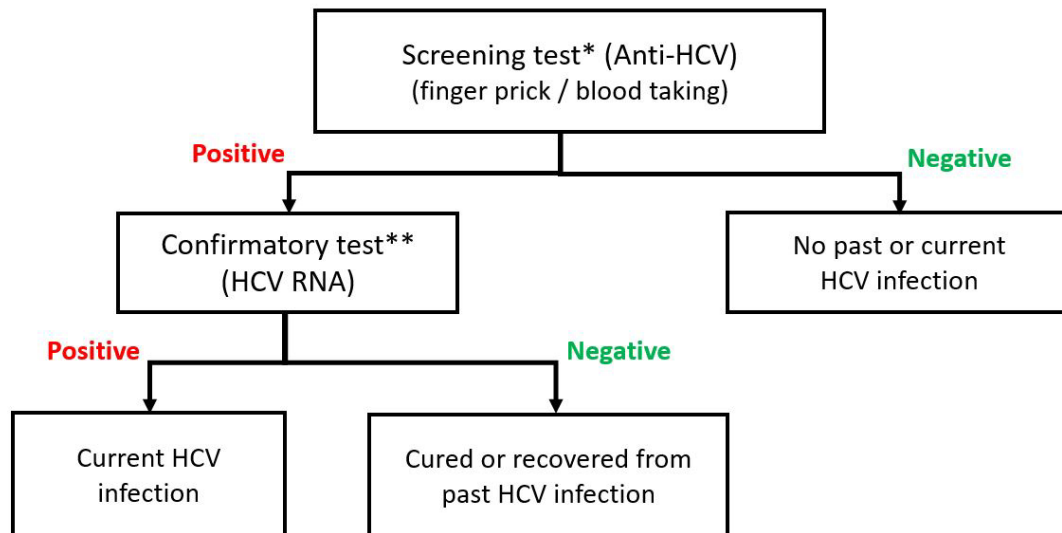
HCV is **not** transmitted through social contact, such as sharing eating utensils, dining together, hugging, holding hands and kissing.

## Persons at higher risk of hepatitis C infection should get tested

- People who inject drugs
- Men who have sex with men

- HIV-positive people
- Recipients of potentially contaminated blood products
- Patients on renal dialysis
- People who have had tattoos or piercings by using inadequately sterilized Instruments

### Blood test is required to diagnose hepatitis C



\* Screening test: Test for antibody against HCV (Anti-HCV) to determine whether a person has past exposure to HCV

\*\* Confirmatory test: Test for HCV ribonucleic acid (HCV RNA) to determine whether a person currently has HCV

- People tested positive for anti-HCV should have a follow-up test to confirm HCV infection status.
- People tested positive for both anti-HCV and HCV RNA are diagnosed as having **HCV infection**, and should be treated.

### Direct-acting antivirals (DAA) can cure hepatitis C

- Highly effective, over 95% of HCV infection can be cured
- Oral administration (do not require injection)
- Treatment usually takes around 8 - 12 weeks
- Minor side effects

With successful clearance of HCV, the risk of progression to cirrhosis and liver cancer and dying from liver diseases can be significantly reduced. Regular examination is still required if there is deteriorated liver function, cirrhosis or its complication before treatment.

As treatment does not confer protective immunity, recovered hepatitis C patients should **stop high-risk behaviours** to prevent HCV re-infection.

## How to prevent hepatitis C infection?

- People who inject drug should stop injecting drugs and get into methadone treatment programme. Never share syringes, needles or other equipment that is potentially contaminated with blood
- Avoid sharing personal care items (e.g. razors, nail scissors and toothbrushes) that are potentially contaminated with blood
- Use condoms correctly and consistently when having sex
- Healthcare workers should always practise standard precautions, including handling and disposing needles and sharps properly and safely
- Currently, there is no vaccine available against hepatitis C



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Viral Hepatitis Control Office  
Special Preventive Programme  
Department of Health  
January 2024