

HEPATITIS C

Hepatitis is a virus that inflames the liver. There are several viruses that can cause hepatitis, these include hepatitis A, B and C.



		<p>Woman's sexual organs (front)</p> <table border="0"> <tr> <td>1 Ovaries</td> <td>4 Cervix</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2 Fallopian tubes</td> <td>5 Vagina</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3 Womb</td> <td>6 Entrance to vagina</td> </tr> </table>	1 Ovaries	4 Cervix	2 Fallopian tubes	5 Vagina	3 Womb	6 Entrance to vagina						
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SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Some people may have no symptoms, but they can still pass on the virus. Symptoms may include:

- A short, flu-like illness.
- Fatigue.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- Diarrhoea.
- Loss of appetite.
- Weight loss.
- Jaundice (yellow tinge to eyes and skin).
- Itchy skin.

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GETTING IT

The hepatitis C virus can be passed on:

- By sharing contaminated needles or other equipment for injecting drugs.
- By using unsterilised equipment for tattooing, acupuncture or body piercing.
- By unprotected penetrative sex (where the penis enters the vagina or anus) or sex which draws blood.
- By unprotected oral sex (from mouth to the genitals or from the genitals to the mouth).
- From an infected mother to her baby.
- Through blood transfusion in a country where blood is not tested - all blood for transfusion in the UK is tested.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

Hepatitis C is diagnosed by a blood test. There are different types of hepatitis C - treatment is more effective for some types than for others.

If you have a current infection, you will be referred to a specialist for further assessment. This may include a liver function test and/or a biopsy where a small sample of your liver is taken for testing.

Current treatments are not suitable for everybody but some patients can be successfully treated and will clear the virus. New drugs are currently being developed.

Some people find that some complementary therapies are helpful in controlling their symptoms, but there is currently no scientific evidence to support this.

If you test positive for hepatitis C it would be advisable to get your current sexual partner into the clinic for a check-up.

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LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Only about 20% of people infected with hepatitis C clear it from their body naturally. The other 80% remain infected and can pass it on to others. After a number of years they could develop:

- Chronic hepatitis.
- Liver cirrhosis.
- Liver cancer.

A few people experience repeated attacks of a flu-like illness or severe tiredness.

If you think you may have hepatitis C, contact your local sexual health (GUM) clinic and make an appointment. It's easy and completely confidential.

For more information on sexual health (including HIV), call the Sexual Health Line free (from the UK) on 0800 567 123, textphone (for people with hearing impairments) 0800 521 361 or phone your local NHS sexual health clinic.

You can also find out more about viral hepatitis from the British Liver Trust at info@britishlivertrust.org.uk or 0870 770 8028.