

Hepatitis C

Patient information and rules of conduct. County Medical Officers' infection prevention sheet.

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that infects the liver and is usually asymptomatic. The infection can clear up on its own, but most infected individuals develop chronic, sometimes lifelong, liver inflammation. The inflammation can become serious if it is allowed to continue for a long period of time. A person infected with hepatitis C must therefore have regular contact with his/her doctor as the disease is usually treatable. Successful treatment leads to freedom from infection and eliminates the risk of further liver damage. Doctor visits and any treatment are free of charge.

Recovery from a hepatitis C infection does not provide protection from being infected again. There is no vaccine against hepatitis C.

Routes of transmission

Hepatitis C is transmitted via infected blood. The virus can be transmitted when drug abusers share injection needles, mixing cups or other accessories. In rare cases, the virus can be transmitted through infected blood coming into contact with damaged skin or mucous membranes. There was a risk of infection through blood and blood products in Sweden prior to 1992. Since then, all blood products are tested for hepatitis C, making the risk of transmission very low.

The risk of becoming infected via vaginal intercourse is very low. The risk of infection is higher during sex that could cause bleeding or damage to the mucous membrane, and if you or your partner has a sexually transmitted disease at that time. It is therefore important that you use condoms during sex with a short-term partner or when there is a risk of bleeding or damage to the mucous membrane. It is reasonable to assume that femidoms (female condoms) will also work, but this method has not been evaluated scientifically. The same can be said for use of dental dams for oral sex. Regardless of which type of protection is chosen, it must be worn throughout the entire session of sex/intimate contact.

When is hepatitis C not infectious?

Hepatitis C cannot be passed on by hugging or kissing, or through tears. Faeces, urine, vomit or catarrh containing no blood are not infectious either. Blood coming into contact with undamaged skin does not present a risk of infection.

Professional activities

Infection with hepatitis C will not normally result in any restrictions to your professional activities or studies.

Pregnancy

The risk of a pregnant woman passing on the infection to her baby is low – less than 5 percent. Hepatitis C therefore does not stand in the way of pregnancy or breastfeeding.

Contact tracing

It is important to find others who may have been infected and could pass it on. For this reason, contact tracing is performed. With contact tracing, you have to name the people who may have infected you – or whom you may have infected – to a responsible contact tracing officer. You are obliged to participate in contact tracing. Your identity will not be released to the people contacted.

Hygiene advice which you should follow so as not to infect anyone else

- Take care to bandage even small wounds.
- Anyone helping you with dressing wounds must wear plastic gloves.
- Pack bloody material carefully before discarding it.
- Clothing stained with blood must be machine-washed.
- Specks of blood on the floor, for example, must be cleaned up using single-use materials which are then discarded. Then wash thoroughly with water and detergent.

Rules of conduct which you should follow so as not to infect anyone else

- You must attend the follow-up visits and tests which your treating doctor considers necessary.
- When you require medical or dental care, you must provide notification indicating that your blood is infectious.
- You must give notice that your blood is infectious if getting a tattoo, your ears or any other body part pierced, or any other treatment that could involve your skin bleeding.
- If anyone gets your blood in a wound, the eyes, nose or mouth, flush immediately with water. You must inform the person that your blood is infected with hepatitis C and that he/she must immediately contact his/her medical centre, nearest infectious disease clinic or 1177/Vårdguiden.
- Do not share toilet items such as razors or toothbrushes with other people.
- If you inject drugs, you must have your own syringes and needles and not let other people use them. Do not share mixing cups or other accessories. The items you use for injecting drugs must be stored so that they do not place others at risk of infection.
- You must not donate blood, sperm, eggs, organs or tissue for transplantation.
- If there is a risk of bleeding and/or damage to the mucous membrane during sex/other intimate contact, you must inform your partner that you have hepatitis C. This applies even if you plan to use a condom/femidom/dental dam.
- Condoms must be worn throughout the entire session in the event of sex where the penis is inserted in the vagina, the rectum or the mouth and there is a risk of bleeding and/or damage to the mucous membrane.

Hepatitis C is considered a public health hazard according to the Swedish Communicable Diseases Act. You are therefore obliged to follow the rules of conduct you receive from your doctor. You may request reassessment of the rules of conduct by the County Medical Officer in your county.