

Patient information factsheet

Hepatitis C – information for people who have used drugs

The facts

- Hepatitis C is a curable illness.
- It is mainly spread via blood- to-blood contact.
- There isn't currently a vaccine available to prevent you from contracting hepatitis C. There is a vaccination for hepatitis A and B but this does NOT protect you from getting hepatitis C or HIV.
- Hepatitis C causes inflammation within the liver, but often no symptoms are felt.
- Hepatitis C is common in people who inject drugs.
- It is really important you don't share any needles, syringes, filters, spoons, water containers, crack pipes, snorting tubes or tourniquets.
- Sexual spread is rare but possible if blood is involved.
- It is thought hepatitis C can live in dried blood for up to four days.

How we diagnose hepatitis C

There are two tests to identify the presence of hepatitis C:

1. Hepatitis C antibody test

This is done via a finger-prick test (dry blood spot test), a mouth swab or a blood test. It will tell us if you have ever been exposed to the virus (now or in the past). This is the first test you will have.

2. Hepatitis C ribonucleic acid (RNA) test

This is done via a blood test and it tells us if you currently have the virus. This may also be referred to as a viral load.

We can only ever confirm you have hepatitis C if you have a positive hepatitis C RNA test.

- Once you've been in contact with hepatitis C you will **ALWAYS** be hepatitis C antibody positive. These antibodies don't protect you from getting hepatitis C again and even if you clear the virus, the antibodies will remain in your blood.
- If you are re-exposed/at risk (e.g. you inject drugs and share any equipment), the only way to confirm you haven't become re-infected is to have an RNA blood test.

Treatment

- You have approximately a 20% chance of spontaneously clearing the virus yourself. This usually happens in the first 6 months following infection if it is going to happen.
- If your body has a very strong/acute reaction following infection with hepatitis C and you go yellow (jaundiced) you're more likely to clear the virus spontaneously without needing treatment.

However it is really important you see a doctor if this happens.

- If you develop long-term (chronic) hepatitis C it is possible to completely clear the virus with a course of treatment.

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What to do

- You should ask your support worker for a hepatitis C antibody test which can be done by a mouth swab or a finger-prick test (dry blood spot test).
- If you are found to have a positive antibody for hepatitis C you need to see the hepatology nurses for a blood test (RNA test).
- A hepatology clinic runs at the New Road centre on **Tuesdays from 9.30am-12pm** (in the clinic room next to the methadone counter). Feel free to pop in.
- You can also call us on **023 8120 4617** for more information.
- We're also happy to see you at Southampton General if you prefer. If so, ask your support worker to discuss your case with the hepatology nurses who will arrange a referral.

For a translation of this document, or a version in another format such as easy read, large print, Braille or audio, please telephone **023 8120 4688**.

For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalneeds**