

# Fact Sheet

## Hepatitis C



### What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. It can be caused by a variety of things including viruses, alcohol and drugs. The hepatitis C virus is one of the viruses that can cause hepatitis. It gets its name from the order in which different viruses causing viral hepatitis were described ie. A, then B, then C.

### Symptoms

Hepatitis C virus infection may cause no obvious symptoms or it may cause jaundice (yellowing of the whites of the eyes and the skin), tiredness, nausea, fever and lack of appetite.

### Who gets hepatitis C virus?

The hepatitis C virus is spread by blood. People at particular risk are intravenous drug users who share needles and people who received blood transfusions before February 1990, when blood screening began in Australia. Hepatitis C can be spread sexually although this does not commonly occur.

### Can babies catch hepatitis C from their mothers?

Yes. If a pregnant woman has chronic hepatitis C virus infection, her baby has a small chance (about 1 in 20) of catching hepatitis C while in the womb or at birth. Hepatitis C virus has not been shown to be transmitted by breast milk.

### What are the long term effects?

People with chronic hepatitis C virus infection may feel perfectly well. However, they may develop cirrhosis of the liver (increasing and permanent scarring of the liver) or liver cancer after many years of infection. It has become a leading indication for liver

transplantation in adults but rarely in children.

### Can hepatitis C be treated?

Yes. Treatment with anti-viral agents such as interferon, is successful in some patients and allows recovery. In the majority, however, it has only a short-lasting or no effect.

### Can hepatitis C virus be caught?

**Q** From other children playing together or in the classroom?

**A** No.

**Q** From a blood transfusion nowadays?

**A** There is a very low risk, but infection can occur if a recently infected blood donor's hepatitis C test is not yet positive.

**Q** Through sex?

**A** Yes, but a low risk (condoms reduce the risk).

**Q** By breastfeeding?

**A** There is no evidence that breast feeding increases the risk of hepatitis C transmission. Benefits of breast feeding outweigh any potential risk of transmission.

### Who should be tested for hepatitis C virus?

- Anyone who has symptoms of hepatitis or anyone with unexplained abnormal liver tests.
- Anyone at risk of hepatitis C due to exposure to blood or blood products before February 1990.
- Intravenous drug users who have shared needles.
- The child of someone at risk of, or known to have, hepatitis C virus.

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### Remember

- Hepatitis C virus is spread by contact with infected blood.
- There is no immunisation against hepatitis C.

This fact sheet is for education purposes only.  
Please consult with your doctor or other health professional  
to make sure this information is right for your child.

*This document was reviewed on Tuesday, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2005.*

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