



**Alliance**  
for Public Health



**Hepatitis C**

**&**

**injection  
drug use**

**Know  
your  
risk!**



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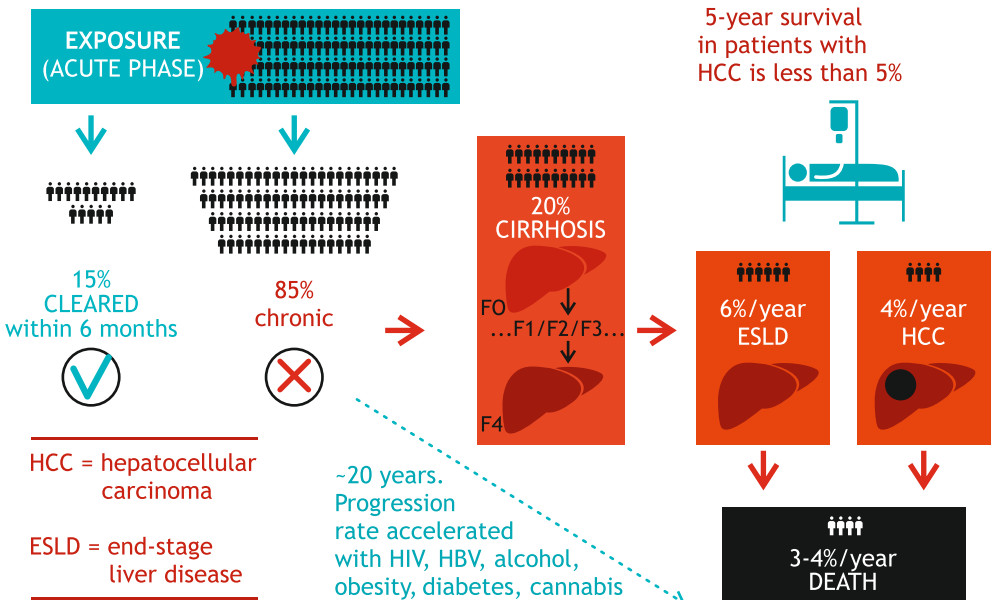
*This  
booklet  
aims  
at giving  
people who  
inject drugs  
important  
information  
about  
hepatitis C,  
starting with  
prevention  
and continuing  
with testing,  
treatment and  
epidemiology.*

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# What is hepatitis C?

- ▶ Hepatitis C is an infectious disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) that results in liver inflammation. The liver is a vital organ that performs many essential functions for the body, including filtering the blood to remove toxins.
- ▶ People exposed to the hepatitis C virus experience either short-term **acute infections** or long-term **chronic infections**.
- ▶ Over time, sustained inflammation causes more permanent damage. This damage can eventually lead to **cirrhosis** (scarring), failure of essential liver functions, liver cancer and death.

## NATURAL HISTORY OF HCV INFECTION



# Hepatitis C symptoms & signs

- ▶ **70-80%** of people with an acute hepatitis C infection have **no symptoms**. When they do occur, symptoms include:

- fever
- fatigue
- loss of appetite
- nausea
- vomiting
- stomach pain
- dark urine
- clay-colored bowel movements
- joint and muscle pain
- yellow color of the skin or eyes (jaundice)

- ▶ After years of **chronic infection**, liver damage can cause:

- easy bleeding and bruising
- itchy skin
- fluid buildup in the abdomen
- leg swelling
- weight loss
- confusion, drowsiness and slurred speech

▶ Anyone with symptoms of possible acute or chronic hepatitis C infection should get tested.

# How is hepatitis C spread?

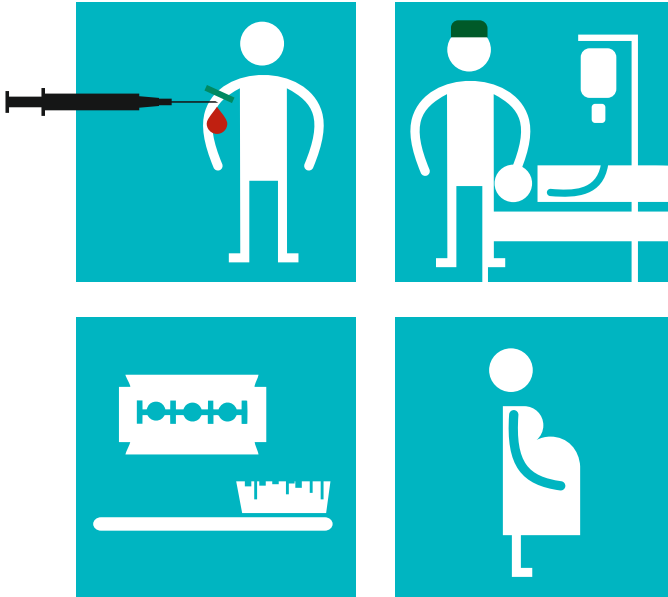
- ▶ The hepatitis C virus is transmitted through **blood-to-blood** contact.
- ▶ It can be spread with some delay since it can survive for days or weeks on surfaces outside the body and even longer inside syringes and other moist items.

Compared to HIV (the virus that causes AIDS), the hepatitis C virus is more infective and **easier to spread** through sharing or reusing any drug injection material.

## 6 weeks

The hepatitis C virus can survive outside the body for up to 6 weeks

- ▶ Most common risks of hepatitis C transmission include:
  - Drug injection with shared needles, syringes, or other equipment
  - Receiving infected blood products



- Tattoos and/or piercings with reused and unsterilised needles or ink
- A needlestick injury with contaminated blood
- Exposure to contaminated medical or dental equipment in hospitals or clinics that do not have proper infection control measures
- Exposure to razors, scissors, toothbrushes and/or similar items that may have contaminated blood on them
- The risk of sexual transmission of hepatitis C is very low
- Babies born to mothers with hepatitis C are thought to have about a 5% risk of being infected. A mother tested positive for Hepatitis C cannot transmit the virus to her baby while breast feeding

# High risk for people who inject drugs

- ▶ Because of the bloodborne nature of hepatitis C, people who inject drugs are particularly affected. In some countries, over 90% of people who inject drugs have been tested positive for hepatitis C.
- ▶ The hepatitis C virus can survive for days to weeks in or on needles, syringes, water, cookers, filters, surfaces, swabs, tourniquets and any similar material.
- ▶ Because the virus is so infective, **sharing or reusing** any material in the drug injection process **increases risk** for spreading hepatitis C.

**63 days**

The hepatitis C virus has been shown to survive up to 63 days at room temperature in some types of syringes with removable needles.





## 80% OF NEW INFECTIONS OCCUR AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN MANY COUNTRIES



New infection among non drug users



- ▶ Some injectable drugs involve higher risks than others. For example, prescription opioids require additional steps to prepare crushed tablets prior to injection and so allow more steps at which equipment may be contaminated.
- ▶ Poor injection skills (e.g. unexperienced new injectors) may also increase the risk of spreading hepatitis C.
- ▶ People who snort drugs are also at **risk** if they share or reuse drug **snorting material**. The lining of the nose has a lot of blood vessels that are easily damaged and may serve as a gateway for the virus.

# Can people who inject drugs take steps to prevent hepatitis C?

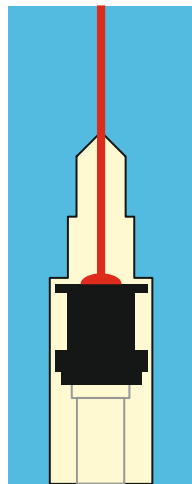
YES

- ▶ The safest step would be to stop injecting drug use. An **opioid substitution therapy** (OST) programme may help.
- ▶ More information on availability of OST in your country can be found on Harm Reduction International web site: <https://www.hri.global/global-state-of-harm-reduction>. Your local community may also have other resources. Check with your local health department.

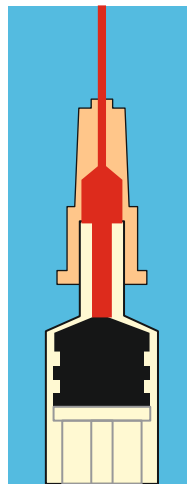
## If consumption of drugs is continued, caution is needed

- Each injection should be made with sterile needles, syringes and preparation equipment.
- Surfaces should be cleaned before preparation and hands washed with soap and water.
- The injection site should be cleaned with alcohol or soap and water prior to injection.
- After injecting, pressure should be applied to the site with a sterile pad to stop the bleeding.

- Drug users should not be injected by someone else.
- Avoid sharing or reusing of any material for preparing, injecting and/or snorting drugs.
- Injections should be done with **low dead space syringes** – typically syringes with fixed needles – as it reduces the risk of getting hepatitis C. Low dead space syringes allow much less blood to be left inside them after injection. They have been shown to reduce the risk of hepatitis C infection by half compared to high dead space syringes.



Low dead  
space syringes



High dead  
space syringes

- ▶ Low dead space syringes may be available in needle and syringe programmes. Check with your local health department.
- ▶ More information is available from Exchange Supplies <http://www.exchangesupplies.org/>

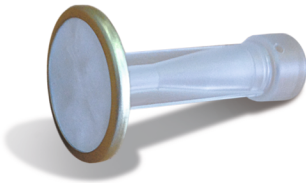
# DO NOT SHARE!



Do not share  
your syringes and needles



Do not share  
your cookers



Do not share  
your filters



Do not share  
your water



Do not share  
your swabs






Do not share  
your tourniquets

**Material that should not be shared also include surfaces and any other item used in preparing or administering injection or snorted drugs.**

# What additional steps should people who inject drugs take?

Recommended additional steps are listed below. Read more about them on pages 14, 17 and 18.

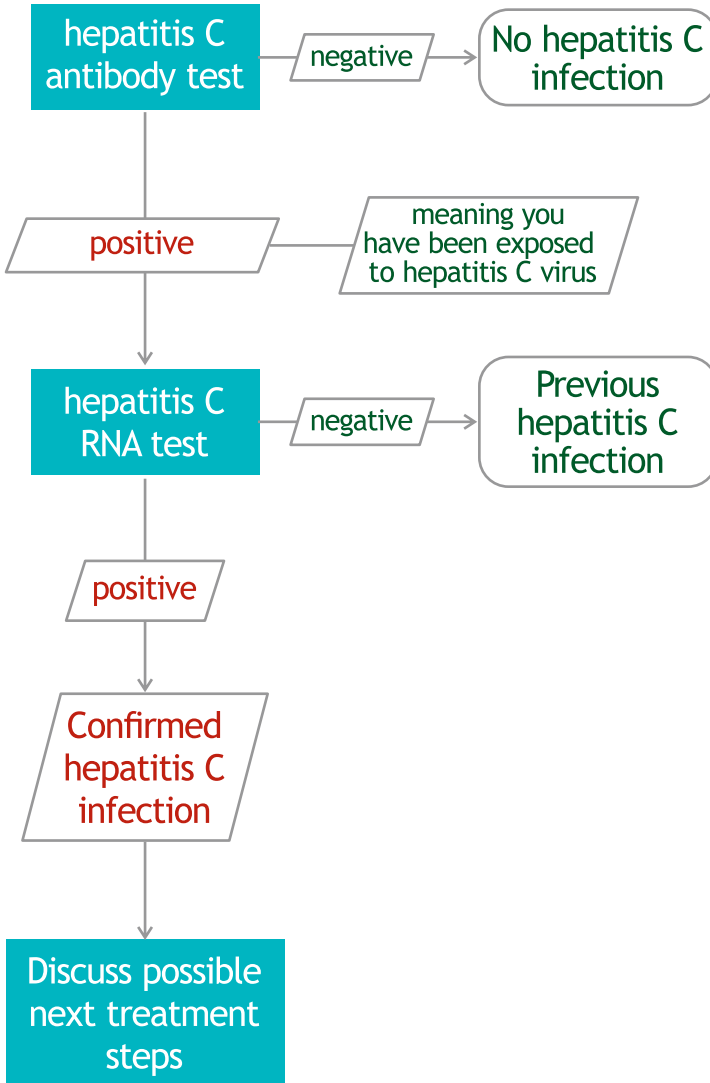
Recommended additional steps	
<b>Get tested for</b>	
	<b>Hepatitis C</b>
	<b>HIV</b>
	<b>Hepatitis B</b>
	Get vaccinated for hepatitis B if the hepatitis B test is negative. If any of the tests is positive, information about treatment is needed.

# Getting tested for hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is diagnosed by testing the blood through two steps:  
1) checking for exposure to the virus, and if positive,  
2) confirming ongoing infection.

- ▶ The first test looks for **hepatitis C antibodies**. When the body encounters hepatitis C virus, it produces antibodies to fight the infection. This test measures if the body has encountered the virus before but not if the virus is still present in the blood.
- ▶ The second test looks for the virus itself, using a method called RNA PCR (the hepatitis C virus is made of RNA). It is needed after a positive first test since antibodies can remain in the blood long after an infection has been cleared up. If the RNA PCR test is positive, then ongoing hepatitis C infection is confirmed and possible treatment should be discussed.

# Hepatitis C testing



# Getting treated for hepatitis C

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C but there is a cure for the infection.

**New medications**, direct acting antivirals (DAAs), have been developed. They are all **oral** (replacing the old and injectable medications), **safe**, **potent and effective** (curing more than 90% of people), with a shorter treatment duration and less interactions with HIV, TB and opioid substitution treatments.

But these new medications are **extremely expensive** and unavailable for the vast majority of those who need them.

Global and national advocacy efforts are being made to make this treatments affordable. Learn more: [www.hepCoalition.org](http://www.hepCoalition.org)

## Risk of reinfection with hepatitis C.

Even after successful treatment, a **person can get hepatitis C again** if exposure to contaminated blood happens again through injection drugs use and/or any of the other ways listed on page 7.



# Hepatitis C and HIV

- ▶ Since both hepatitis C and HIV are transmitted through contaminated blood-to-blood contact, people who inject drugs are at high risk for both infections (**coinfection**).
- ▶ The risk of developing advanced liver disease due to hepatitis C is higher for people with HIV coinfection.
- ▶ **Close monitoring of HIV** medicines is needed for people with liver disease due to hepatitis coinfection.
- ▶ **A person** with hepatitis C and HIV coinfection **should be treated for both infections.**

**17%** of people who inject drugs who are positive to hepatitis C are also HIV positive

# Hepatitis C and other liver problems

- ▶ **Hepatitis B** is another virus that causes liver damage after being spread through contaminated blood-to-blood contact. People who inject drugs are at high risk for this infection if they share or reuse any drug injection material.
- ▶ **Get tested** for hepatitis B.
- ▶ If negative, **get vaccinated** for it.
- ▶ People with both infections should receive treatment just like those with hepatitis C only.
- ▶ In addition, people with liver disease should **reduce alcohol intake**. Alcohol can also cause permanent liver damage.
- ▶ People with liver disease should be cautious with the use of medicines. Many medicines can affect the liver.

# Hepatitis C worldwide

- ▶ Worldwide, around 110 million people are infected with hepatitis C and nearly 80 million of these people have a chronic disease that may lead to cirrhosis, liver cancer and death (700,000 persons die every year).
- ▶ Among people who inject drugs, those aged 15 to 24 have the highest rates of new infection since they are more likely to share drug injection material.
- ▶ Worldwide, it is estimated that **67%** of people who inject drugs have hepatitis C, **17%** of them being also HIV-positive.

Around **2 million** people who inject drugs globally need hepatitis C treatment immediately...

...but less than 2% of them **are treated each year.**



“Unite to Eliminate HepC: Know It, Test It, Treat It” is a global campaign launched by the Alliance Centre for HIV, Hepatitis C and Drug Use in partnership with a group of International HIV/AIDS Alliance Linking Organisations, calling for more accessible and affordable hepatitis C testing and treatment.

Join the “Unite to Eliminate HepC: Know It, Test It, Treat It” campaign on social media and help promote the campaign:[facebook.com/unite2eliminate](https://facebook.com/unite2eliminate)



[www.hepCoalition.org](http://www.hepCoalition.org)

hepCoalition.org is conceived as a tool to support the development of a global advocacy movement on access to hepatitis C diagnostics, treatment and support for people living with a high risk for HCV in low- and middle-income countries, and particularly for people who use drugs and people living with HIV/HCV.