Hepatitis C & injection drug use

UNITE TO ELIMINATE hepC

Know your risK!

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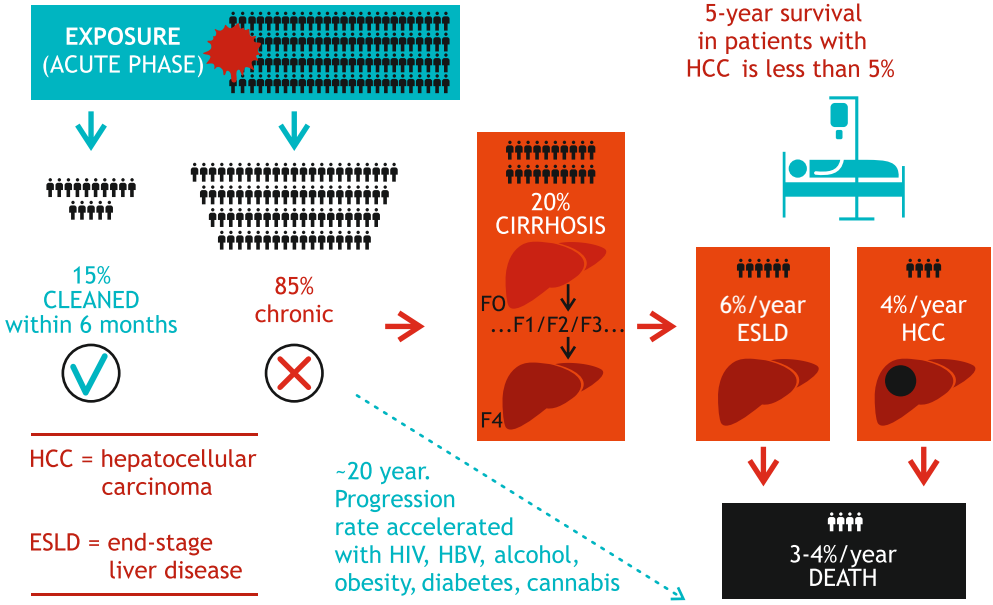
This booklet aims to give people who inject drugs important information about hepatitis C, starting with prevention and continuing to more details about the disease.

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What is hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis C is an infectious disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) that results in inflammation of the liver. 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, continuing 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 a new 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 build up in the abdomen
  - leg swelling
  - weight loss
  - confusion, drowsiness and slurred speech

- **Anyone with symptoms of possible new or chronic hepatitis C infection should get tested.**

How is hepatitis C spread?

- The hepatitis C virus is spread through infected **blood-to-blood** contact.
- It can be spread with some delay since it can survive for days 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.

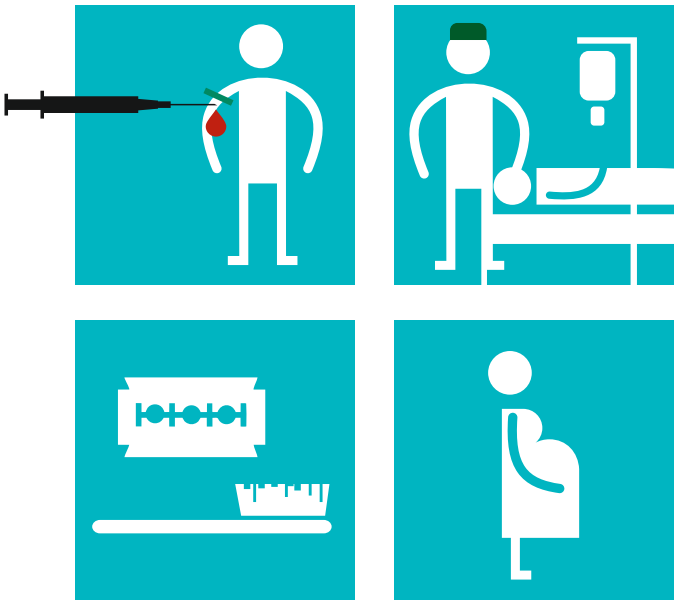
6 weeks

The hepatitis C virus has been shown to survive on surfaces for up to 6 weeks.

- The most common risks for aquiring hepatitis C include:

• Drug injection with shared needles, syringes, or other equipment;

• Transfusion of blood and/or blood products not tested for hepatitis C;



• 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% chance of being infected. A mother tested positive for Hepatitis C, can 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 groups, 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.

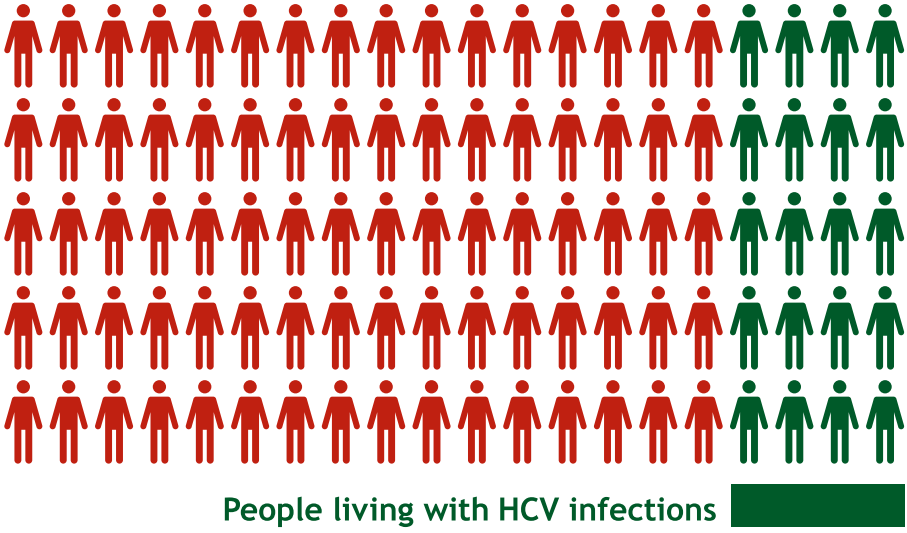
- Because the virus is so infective, **sharing or reusing** any material in the drug injection process **increases risk** for spread of hepatitis C.



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 CURRENT PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN MANY COUNTRIES



People living with HCV infections

- The type of drug being injected can increase the risk. For example, prescription opioids require additional steps to prepare crushed tablets prior to injection and so allow more points at which equipment may be contaminated.

- Poor injection skills, such as those of new injectors, can 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 allow entry of the virus.

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

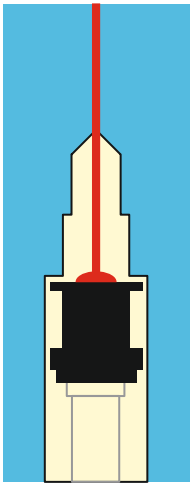
YES

- The safest step would be to stop injecting drug use. An **opioid substitution therapy** programme could help.
- More information is available from the Alliance for Public Health and Exchange Supplies.
  Your local community may also have other resources. Check with your local health department.

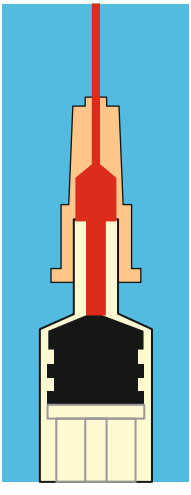
If consumption of drugs is continued, caution is needed

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

• One person should not inject another person.
• No sharing or reusing of any material for preparing, injecting and/or snorting drugs should be done.
• Injections should be done with **low dead space syringes** – typically syringes with fixed needles – can reduce the risk of getting hepatitis C. Low dead space to reduce syringes allow much less blood to be left inside them after injection. They have been shown to reduce therisk of hepatitis C infection by half compared to high deadspace 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/

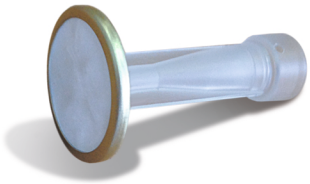
DO NOT SHARE!



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 not to share also include the surfaces and any other item used in preparing or administering injection or snorted drugs.

What additional steps should people who inject drugs take?

The steps in the list below are recommended. Read more about them on pages 14, 17 and 18.

Recommended additional steps	
Get tested for	
✓	**Hepatitis C**
✓	**HIV**
✓	**Hepatitis B**
	Get vaccinated for hepatitis B if the hepatitis B test is negative. If any of the tests is positive, treatment is needed.

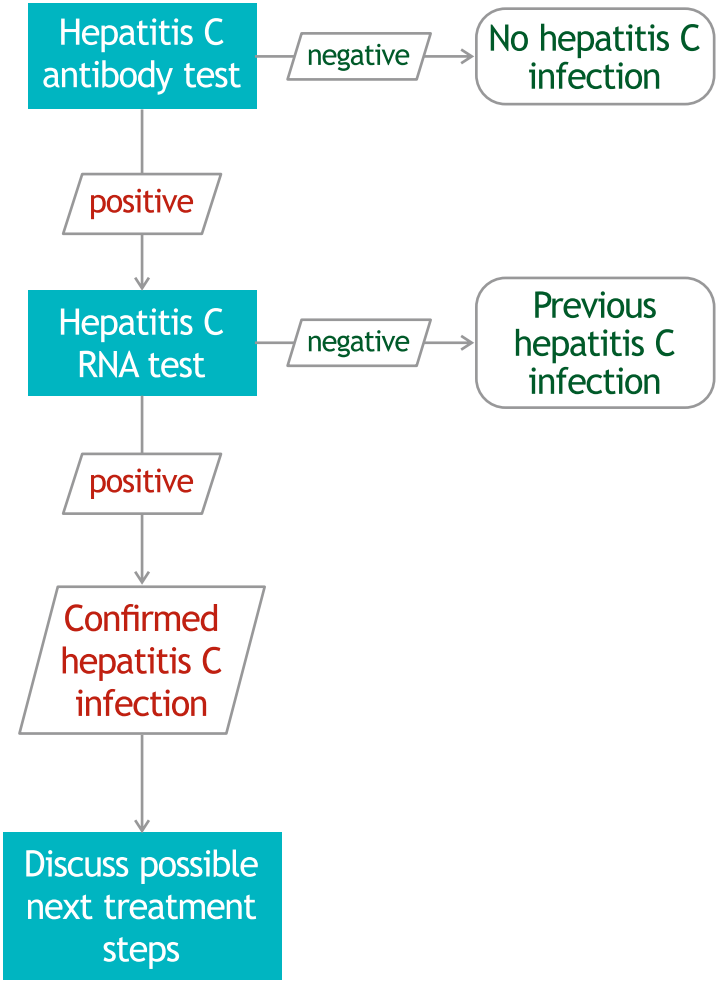
Getting tested for hepatitis C

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

- The first test looks for **hepatitis C antibodies**. When the hepatitis C virus is in the body, the body reaction is the production of antibodies to fight the infection.

- 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

New medications, direct active 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.

Risk of reinfection with hepatitis C

Hepatitis C and HIV

- Since both hepatitis C and HIV are transmitted by 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 even when medications (antiretroviral therapy (ART)) successfully control HIV.

- **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

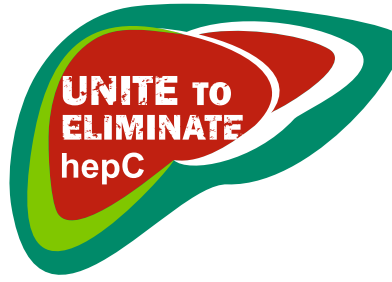
- **Hepatitis B** is another virus that causes liver damage after being spread by contaminated blood-to-blood contact. People who inject drugs are at high risk for this infection if they share or reuse any drug injection material.
- **Get tested** for hepatitis B
- If negative, **get vaccinated** for it.
- People with both infections should receive treatment just as 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, about 110 million people are infected with hepatitis C and about 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 years have the highest rates of new infection since they are more likely to share drug injection material.
- Worldwide, **67%** of people who inject drugs are thought to have hepatitis C, while **17%** of them HIV-positive.

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

...but less than 2% of people who inject drugs 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

