

FACT SHEET

HEPATITIS C (HCV)



BRITISH COLUMBIA
CENTRE for EXCELLENCE
in HIV/AIDS

About Hepatitis C

- The hepatitis c virus is spread through blood-to-blood contact. To contract hepatitis c, blood infected with the hepatitis c virus must get into your blood stream.¹
- To determine if a person has hepatitis c, a hepatitis c antibody test is required.²
- Individuals risk exposure to hepatitis c by using injection drugs (even once), getting tattoos, piercings, pedicures, manicures or medical procedures with improperly sterilized equipment, sharing personal hygiene items with an infected person (e.g. razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers).
- Individuals who had a blood transfusion or received blood products prior to July 1990 are also at an increased risk.
- If the body is not able to fight off the virus, chronic hepatitis may develop which can lead to cirrhosis (liver scarring), liver failure, liver cancer or the need for a liver transplant later in life.
- Chronic hepatitis c is a “silent” disease because often no symptoms appear until the liver is severely damaged. Many infected people live for up to 20 or 30 years without feeling sick.¹
- The hepatitis c infection can be either acute or chronic, depending on how long it remains in the body. Acute is when the infection lasts up to six months; chronic is an infection that lasts longer than six months.⁴
- There is a stigma linked with hepatitis c infection because of its association with injection drug use.⁵ The stigma poses a major barrier to testing, detection and treatment. Those who are undiagnosed may continue to unknowingly spread the virus to others.⁶

Prevalence of Hepatitis C in Canada

- An estimated 300,000 Canadians are currently infected with hepatitis c virus,⁷ and 3,200–5,000 individuals are newly infected each year.⁸
- By 2022, the number of hepatitis-related deaths will increase by one-third.⁹
- British Columbia has the highest rate of hepatitis c in Canada. There are an estimated 80,000 people living with the virus in B.C.²⁶ About 2,500 new cases of hepatitis c are identified in B.C. each year.¹¹ Vancouver Island has one of the highest rates of infection in Canada.¹⁰
- Injection drug use, current or past, accounts for more than 56 per cent of all hepatitis c infection in Canada.⁹
- Approximately 35 per cent of those infected with hepatitis c virus are unaware of their infection and it is often not detected until symptoms appear.¹²
- Blood transfusions prior to 1990 account for 13 per cent of all cases of hepatitis c.⁷
- Approximately 20 per cent of hepatitis c cases in Canada occur in the immigrant community, with immigration contributing to approximately 33 per cent of all new cases.⁹ Over the past 40 years the majority of new immigrants have originated from countries with a higher seroprevalence hepatitis c than that in Canada. Chronic hepatitis c infection is likely an unrecognized health burden in the immigrant population given the fact that they have increased mortality from chronic viral hepatitis (2–4 fold) as compared to the Canadian population, a large proportion of which is likely due to chronic HCV infection.¹³
- The Public Health Agency of Canada cites 2010 projected annual rates of hepatitis (per 100,000), which include the following: British Columbia (49); Ontario (33); and Québec (19).¹⁴

Disease Burden in Canada

- The economic burden of hepatitis c is high. The direct costs of hepatitis c virus are associated with physician services, hospitalization, diagnostic testing, antiviral therapy and other medical procedures, including liver transplants.¹⁵
- Combined with indirect costs of hepatitis c, the financial burden of the disease in Canada was estimated at \$500 million annually in 2000, projected to have reached \$1 billion in 2010.¹⁶
- Long-term complications of hepatitis c are costly. Three-quarters of those who acquire hepatitis c virus become chronically infected and 14–19 per cent will develop cirrhosis (liver scarring) within 20 years, which may lead to liver failure, liver cancer and death.¹⁵
- According to a recent report released by Statistics Canada on Canadian Trends in Cancer Prevalence, liver rates among males ages 50–79 are significantly higher than in younger age groups or among women of the same age. Liver cancer rates are on the rise because the major causes of primary liver cancer — hepatitis B and hepatitis C — are not being identified and treated early enough.¹⁷
- In Canada, hepatitis c is the leading cause of liver transplants.¹⁸
- Early treatment of hepatitis c can reduce transmission and long-term management costs.¹⁹

Diagnosis and Treatment of Hepatitis C

- The Canadian Association for the Study of the Liver, with funding from the Canadian Liver Foundation (CLF), has issued new Consensus Guidelines, which point to great advancements in the treatment of hepatitis C, including newer more effective treatment options and a greater range of diagnostic testing.²¹
- The CLF recommends that all adults born between 1945 and 1975 undergo a test for hepatitis C as data show that chronic hepatitis C is most pervasive among those born during this time period.

Hepatitis B vs. Hepatitis C

TRANSMISSION

- People can be infected with hepatitis B through contact with infectious blood, semen and other bodily fluids, primarily through birth to a mother who has hepatitis B; sexual contact with an infected person; sharing of contaminated needles, syringes, or other injection drug equipment; and needlesticks or other sharp instrument injuries.²²
- People can be infected with hepatitis C through contact with blood of an infected person, primarily through sharing contaminated needles, syringes or other injection drug equipment; and less commonly, through sexual contact with an infected person, birth to an infected mother and needlesticks or other sharp instrument injuries.²²

SYMPTOMS

- At least 30 per cent of serious cases of hepatitis B show no symptoms.²³ For people who experience symptoms, the most commonly reported include jaundice, loss of appetite, abdominal discomfort, dark urine or fatigue.²⁴

- The majority of hepatitis C cases show no symptoms.²³ For people who experience symptoms, the most commonly reported include fatigue, lethargy, reduced appetite, sore muscles and joints, nausea, abdominal pain or jaundice.³

VACCINE AND CURE

- Unlike hepatitis B, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C.²⁵
- Chronic hepatitis C, unlike HIV and hepatitis B, can be cured.²⁰

References

- 1 Canadian Liver Foundation. http://www.liver.ca/liver-disease/types/viral_hepatitis/Hepatitis_C.aspx. Accessed January 16, 2013.
- 2 Centre for Disease Control <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/rr5203a1.htm>.
- 3 Health Canada. <http://www.healthycanadians.gc.ca/health-sante/disease-maladie/hepc-eng.php>. Accessed January 16, 2013.
- 4 The Toronto Western Hospital. http://www.torontoliver.ca/education/hepatitis_c.aspx. Accessed December 11, 2012.
- 5 HCV Advocate. Stigma and Hepatitis C. http://www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/Stigma%20Guide.pdf. Accessed December 11, 2012.
- 6 Health Canada. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/hepc-eng.php>. Accessed December 13, 2012.
- 7 Canadian Liver Foundation. http://www.liver.ca/support-liver-foundation/advocate/clf-position-statements/hepatitis_C_testing.aspx. Accessed December 11, 2012.
- 8 Canadian Institutes of Health Research. About the Hep C Research Initiative. <http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/38855.html>. Accessed on December 11, 2012.
- 9 Sherman M, Shafran S, Burak K, et al. **Management of Chronic Hepatitis C: Consensus Guidelines.** *Can J Gastroenterol* (2007).
- 10 HepCBC. http://hepcbc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/20120222_HepCBC_PRESS_RELEASE.pdf. Accessed on January 16, 2013.
- 11 HealthLinkBC. <http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian/hfile40a.stm>. Accessed March 15, 2011.
- 12 Public Health Agency of Canada. <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hepc/pubs/ihp-ips/index-eng.php>. Accessed December 11, 2012.
- 13 Greenaway C, Wong D, Assayag D, Deschenes M, Hui C, Ueffing E, Pottie K, Sandoe A, Rashid M, Heathcote J. **Screening for Hepatitis C infection: evidence review for newly arriving immigrants and refugees.** *CMAJ* 2011; DOI 10.1503/cmaj.090313. Accessed January 25, 2013.
- 14 Public Health Agency of Canada. **Reported cases of hepatitis C from January 1 to June 30, 2009 and January to June 30, 2010 and corresponding annual rates for the years 2009 and 2010.** <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/sti-its-surv-epi/hepc/pdf/hepc-2010-eng.pdf>. Accessed July 18, 2011.
- 15 Krajden M, Kuo M, Zagorski B, Alvarez M, Yu A, Krahn M. **Health care cost associated with hepatitis C: Longitudinal cohort study.** *Can J Gastroenterol* 2010;24(12):717-726. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3004444/>
- 16 Public Health Agency of Canada. <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2008/er-re-hepc/er-re-hepc1-eng.php>. Accessed July 18, 2011.
- 17 Canadian Liver Foundation. http://www.liver.ca/newsroom/press-releases/1-16-2012_Liver_cancer_rates.aspx. Accessed January 16, 2013.
- 18 Canadian Liver Foundation. <http://www.liver.ca/liver-disease/>. Accessed January 16, 2013.
- 19 Werb D, Wood E, Kerr T, Hershield N, Palmer RW, Remis R. **Treatment costs of hepatitis C infection among injection drug users in Canada 2006-2026.** *Int J Drug Policy*, 2011; 22(1):70-76.
- 20 Pearlman BL, Traub N. **Sustained Virologic Response to Antiviral Therapy for Chronic Hepatitis C Virus Infection: A Cure and So Much More.** *Clin Infect Dis.* 2011 Apr;52(7):889-900.
- 21 **An update on the management of chronic hepatitis C: Consensus guidelines from the Canadian Association for the Study of the Liver.** 2012 Jun. http://www.buksa.com/CASL/2012HepCGuidelines_CJG.pdf.
- 22 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/factsheets/hepatitis.htm>. Accessed January 28, 2013.
- 23 Public Health Agency of Canada. <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hep/index-eng.php>. Accessed January 28, 2013.
- 24 Canadian Liver Foundation. http://www.liver.ca/liver-disease/types/viral_hepatitis/Hepatitis_B.aspx. Accessed January 16, 2013.
- 25 Public Health Agency of Canada. http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hcai-iamss/bbp-pts/hepatitis/hep_b-eng.php. Accessed January 16, 2013.
- 26 BC Centre for Disease Control.