

HCV and Intravenous Drug Use

The Plain Facts

If you're an IV drug user, there's a good chance you already have hepatitis C. "Hep C," or "HCV," is **over 10 times more contagious than HIV**. It's really easy to get if you shoot or snort, and very difficult, if not impossible, to get rid of. With Hep C it doesn't matter how long you've been shooting or snorting—many people get it after only using once. Up to 85% of IV drug users test positive for Hep C.

The problem is that hepatitis C is sneaky. It can lie there for years without doing anything, and then, when you finally get clean—**WHAM!!**—you get really sick or find out that you're dying because your liver isn't working right.

GET TESTED! GET VACCINATED FOR HEP A & B



If you have ever shared needles, even once, twenty or thirty years ago, you may have Hep C and not even know it. Nine out of ten IV drug users may have it. Get tested. There is a treatment. There is no vaccine for Hep C, but you can protect yourself from getting Hep A & B. It's worse to have more than one hepatitis. Hep A & B vaccines are free for IV drug users and those with Hep C in BC—no questions asked. Check with your local public health unit or needle exchange.

Hep C, like Hep B and HIV, can be transmitted by sharing toothbrushes, razors, nail clippers, or other items that can cause bleeding. Sexual transmission is considered a possible but unlikely mode of transmission. So play it safe.

Practice Harm Reduction!

Sharing any drug injecting equipment or snorting equipment can easily lead to Hep C and other diseases carried in the blood being passed on. Equipment is not just the needle and syringe, but also includes spoons, mixing dishes, filters, water and citric acid.

If you inject drugs, use a new needle and syringe each time. Don't share any injecting equipment. Clean the injection site with alcohol and a new cotton swab. Use sterile water to prepare drugs. Boiling equipment in tap water for several minutes will sterilise it. Don't use old needles, cookers or cotton to prepare drugs. New equipment can be bought from some pharmacies, or is available free from needle exchanges. Most needle exchanges don't require you to bring in old needles to get new ones. You should be able to get a supply of new, sterile needles.

Get Rid of Your Used Syringes Carefully

Taking your old syringes to the needle exchange is the best way to safely get rid of dirty needles. You also get a new supply of clean needles when you bring your old ones in.

Needle exchange programs provide sharps containers for safe disposal. If you do not have one, put the needle and syringe into a tin can, or heavy plastic container with a closing lid (like an empty milk or bleach jug), then dispose of it in a garbage can or take it to your local needle exchange.

If sharing is impossible to avoid, equipment can be cleaned between users as a **last** resort. Bleach should stay in the syringe for at least 30 seconds. Remember not to flush out into the clean bleach solution or water. Do not use hot water: it will make the blood congeal (clot) so traces may be left behind. Boiling equipment may not remove all the blood, and disposable equipment usually buckles if boiled. It is safer to use the needle exchange program!

CLEANING EQUIPMENT

1. Draw 5% regular household bleach solution through the needle into the syringe, fill completely and flush x 3.
2. Soak the bleach-filled syringe in the bottle of bleach solution and leave for 10 minutes.
3. Draw fresh cold water through the needle into the syringe and flush x 3.

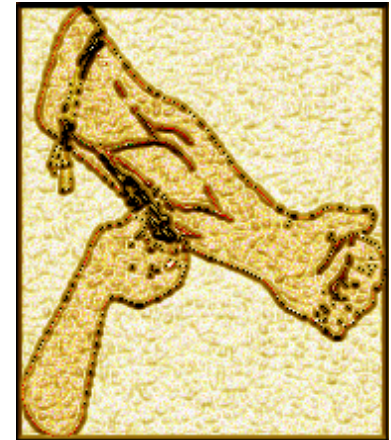
Using a new disposable needle each & every time is safer than cleaning equipment. Check out your local needle exchange!

How can I tell if I have hepatitis C?

One to two months after the hepatitis C virus infects your body, antibodies appear in your blood. A blood test can detect these antibodies and show that you have been infected with the hepatitis C virus. Not everyone who has antibodies in their blood is still infected with the virus, but most people are. If you have tested positive for the virus, assume you are infected and can infect other people. There is also a blood test that can tell if you are carrying the virus.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Some people feel well, have no symptoms, so they don't know they have hepatitis C. Other people may have a brief illness with symptoms of hepatitis usually appearing six to nine weeks after they have been infected with the virus. Symptoms of acute hepatitis C infection may include: fever, tiredness, jaundice (yellow skin or eyes), abdominal pain, dark urine, loss of appetite, and nausea (feeling sick to your stomach).



For Further Information, contact your public health nurse or family doctor. Your nearest needle exchange or support group is:

VARCS: Mobile X
Mobile Exchange
Tel. 888-4487

Will pick up used needles.

AVI Street Outreach Services
(SOS) Fixed site.
Needle drop off.
Tel. 384-2366

On the Net:
info@hepcbc.ca
www.hepcbc.ca

The information in this brochure is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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DRUGS
&
HCV



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