

You've Just Been Diagnosed With Hepatitis C

If you've just been diagnosed with Hepatitis C, you probably have a lot of questions. You may be confused, perhaps scared, and certainly concerned about what having hepatitis C means to you, your family and your future. It is important to know that you are not alone and that you have the support of your health care professionals, and that there are effective treatment options available.

Once you have been diagnosed with Hepatitis C there are several steps you will need to take:

- Obtain a **vaccination** against both Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B.
- Have **tests** to measure your liver's ability to produce proteins and products excreted by the liver, such as bile.
- Ask your doctor to make an appointment to have a **liver biopsy**, which is the most accurate method to assess the amount of inflammation and degree of scarring to your liver.
- Take **precautions** to prevent the spread of HCV to others and also to protect yourself from being infected with a different strain or genotype of the virus.
- Consider **early treatment** if possible.
- **Learn more** about HCV and consider **lifestyle changes** such as; consuming less, or eliminating alcohol and drugs, improving your eating habits and exercising regularly.

How Widespread is Hepatitis C

There are over 250,000 known cases of HCV infection in Canada.

Approximately 25% of Canadians actually know that they are infected with HCV.

HCV infection figures could therefore be 3 – 4 times higher than the known figures.

As many as 5,000 Canadians become newly infected with Hepatitis C each year. 500 cases are from Manitoba.

HCV can be found throughout the world.

Shared use of drug tools & equipment accounts for about 70% of all new HCV infections in Canada.

The rate of HCV infection among prison inmates is higher than the general population.

Hemophiliacs who received blood products prior to 1990 had a 95% rate of HCV infection.

Additional Information

This **Six Pamphlet Series**, along with the **Resource Directory**, is designed to provide you with a list of people in your community who can help give you a better understanding of Hepatitis C, such as: how to prevent its spread, treatment choices available and ways to take control of your life through healthy lifestyle choices.

- **See** the Manitoba Hepatitis C Resource Directory for a glossary of terms and definitions and HCV resource contacts within the community.
- **Read** the entire Six Pamphlet Series on Hepatitis C.
- **Contact** the Manitoba Hepatitis C Support Community by telephone at: 779-6464, email: info@mbhepc.org or through our website: www.mbhepc.org

Hepatitis C

The Basic Facts

Pamphlet # **1**
in a 6 Pamphlet Series
On Hepatitis C

- **What is Hepatitis C**
- **Phases of Hepatitis C**
- **You've Just Been Diagnosed With Hepatitis C**
- **How Widespread is Hepatitis C**



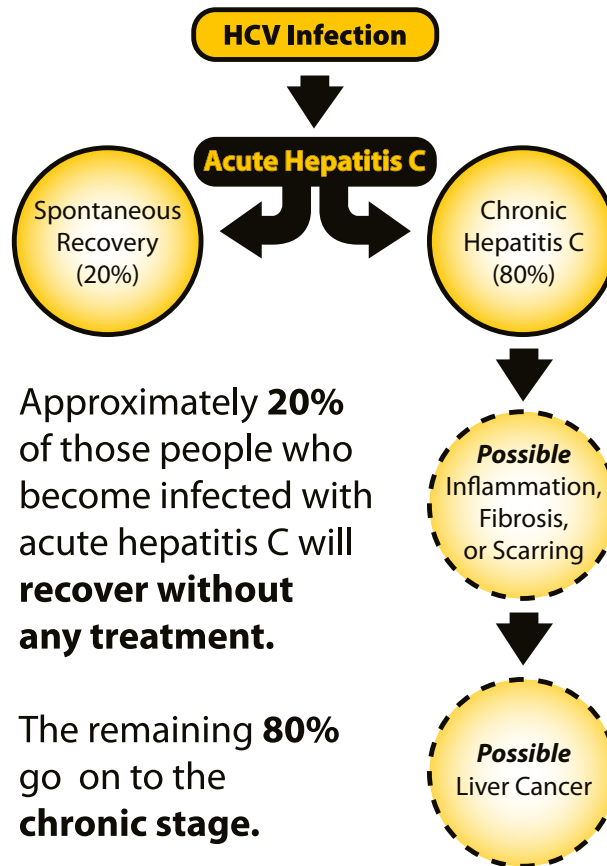
What is Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a “**blood born**” disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) which has infected your liver, and causes inflammation (swelling) and scarring of the liver. The hepatitis C virus is **different** from the Hepatitis A and B virus. A virus is a very small life form that attaches itself to your healthy cells and forces them to make more of the virus. Your body tries to fight viruses with antibodies, but the hepatitis C virus is particularly strong; it changes its make-up to fight back against your body’s defences, which are there to protect the body.

The first stage of the HCV infection is called **acute (severe) or (very bad) hepatitis C** and if the virus continues in the body for more than 6 months, the disease enters the **chronic (never-ending) hepatitis C** phase. In some cases it may lead to **cirrhosis**, in which healthy liver cells are replaced with scar tissue that interferes with the liver working properly. Many people will feel healthy even if they have cirrhosis. A very small number of people in the group that develops cirrhosis will experience liver cancer, or HCC.

Because liver damage does not always have signs, doctors will usually order a liver biopsy (a sample) to find out how much damage has been done to your liver.

Although scientists cannot explain why, approximately 20% of those people who become infected with acute hepatitis C will get better without any treatment, as the body passes the hepatitis C virus through its system with no lasting effects. The remaining 80% go on to the chronic or **unending** stage with about 15% continuing to the cirrhosis stage.



Approximately **20%** of those people who become infected with acute hepatitis C will **recover without any treatment.**

The remaining **80%** go on to the **chronic stage.**

There are six main types of HCV, called **genotypes**, or **strain of the virus**, that have been identified. Genotype testing is important for two reasons – first because some genotypes react better to treatment than others and secondly because it is possible to become infected with more than one genotype, or form of the virus after multiple exposures to HCV.

Phases of Hepatitis C

Phase I: Infection

HCV enters the blood stream and attaches itself to liver cells and begins to reproduce.

The new viruses, which are made in the liver cells, take over more liver cells and infect them.

Phase II: Inflammation

Infected liver cells become red-looking or sore.

This soreness causes liver cells to die.

Phase III: Fibrosis

Fibrosis, which is scarring of the liver, **may** occur over time.

Strands of scar tissue begin to grow among the healthy and red, infected liver cells.

The growth of fibrosis may depend upon how long you have been infected with HCV.

Phase IV: Cirrhosis

As fibrosis increases, these strands of scar tissue grow into nodules (small growths). This is called cirrhosis.

As further damage happens, cirrhosis may affect how blood flows into and out of the liver, which slows down normal liver functions.

Cirrhosis causes lasting liver damage because of the wide-spread scarring which shrinks the liver, making it much smaller.