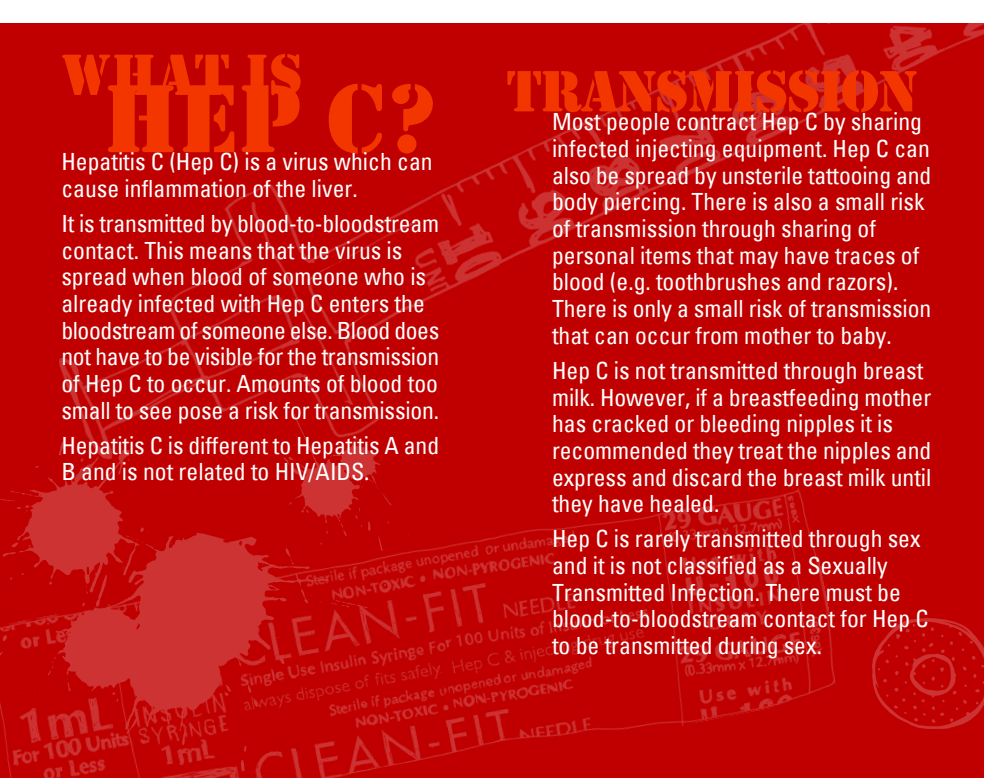




© Hepatitis C Council of South Australia Inc. & SAVIVE 2004
 Produced with the assistance of the Drug & Alcohol Services Council.
 Produced with funding from the Australian Government as part of the COAG National Illicit Drug Diversion Initiative.



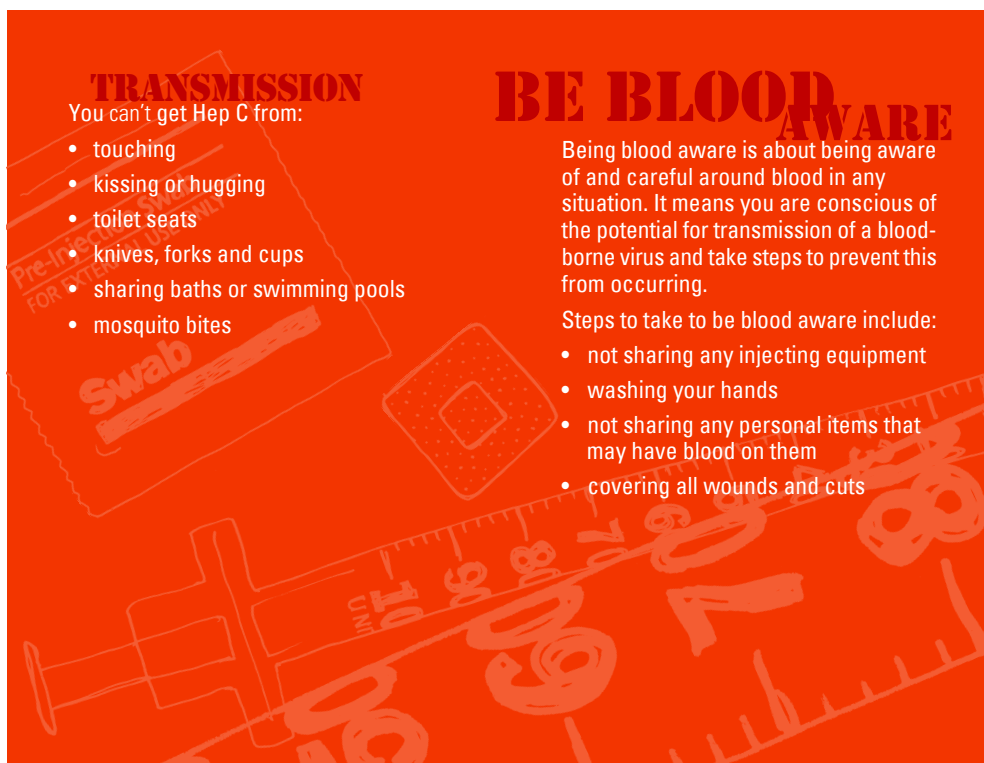
WHAT IS HEP C? TRANSMISSION

Hepatitis C (Hep C) is a virus which can cause inflammation of the liver. It is transmitted by blood-to-bloodstream contact. This means that the virus is spread when blood of someone who is already infected with Hep C enters the bloodstream of someone else. Blood does not have to be visible for the transmission of Hep C to occur. Amounts of blood too small to see pose a risk for transmission. Hepatitis C is different to Hepatitis A and B and is not related to HIV/AIDS.

Most people contract Hep C by sharing infected injecting equipment. Hep C can also be spread by unsterile tattooing and body piercing. There is also a small risk of transmission through sharing of personal items that may have traces of blood (e.g. toothbrushes and razors). There is only a small risk of transmission that can occur from mother to baby.

Hep C is not transmitted through breast milk. However, if a breastfeeding mother has cracked or bleeding nipples it is recommended they treat the nipples and express and discard the breast milk until they have healed.

Hep C is rarely transmitted through sex and it is not classified as a Sexually Transmitted Infection. There must be blood-to-bloodstream contact for Hep C to be transmitted during sex.



TRANSMISSION

You can't get Hep C from:

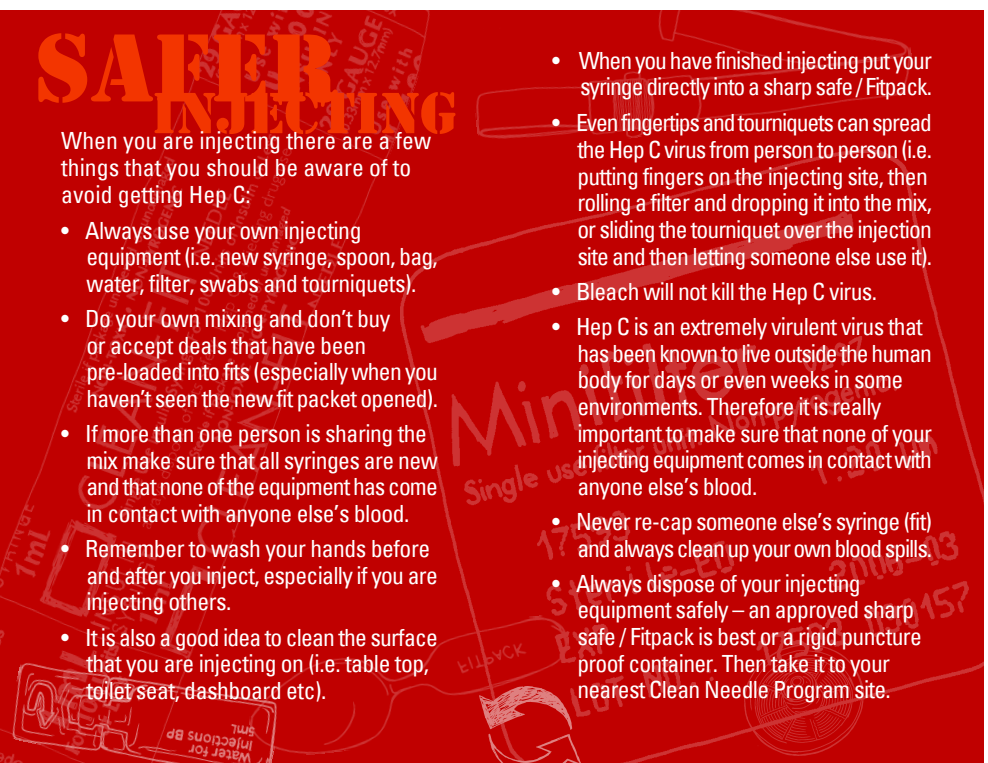
- touching
- kissing or hugging
- toilet seats
- knives, forks and cups
- sharing baths or swimming pools
- mosquito bites

BE BLOOD AWARE

Being blood aware is about being aware of and careful around blood in any situation. It means you are conscious of the potential for transmission of a blood-borne virus and take steps to prevent this from occurring.

Steps to take to be blood aware include:

- not sharing any injecting equipment
- washing your hands
- not sharing any personal items that may have blood on them
- covering all wounds and cuts

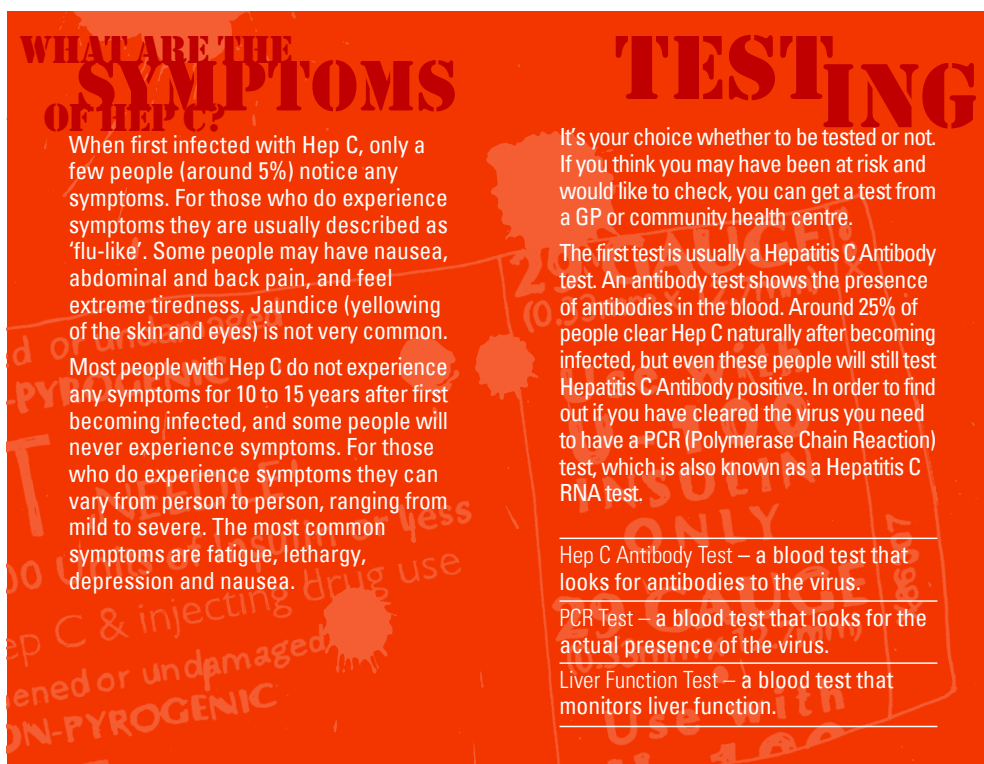


SAFER INJECTING

When you are injecting there are a few things that you should be aware of to avoid getting Hep C:

- Always use your own injecting equipment (i.e. new syringe, spoon, bag, water, filter, swabs and tourniquets).
- Do your own mixing and don't buy or accept deals that have been pre-loaded into fits (especially when you haven't seen the new fit packet opened).
- If more than one person is sharing the mix make sure that all syringes are new and that none of the equipment has come in contact with anyone else's blood.
- Remember to wash your hands before and after you inject, especially if you are injecting others.
- It is also a good idea to clean the surface that you are injecting on (i.e. table top, toilet seat, dashboard etc).

- When you have finished injecting put your syringe directly into a sharp safe / Fitpack.
- Even fingertips and tourniquets can spread the Hep C virus from person to person (i.e. putting fingers on the injecting site, then rolling a filter and dropping it into the mix, or sliding the tourniquet over the injection site and then letting someone else use it).
- Bleach will not kill the Hep C virus.
- Hep C is an extremely virulent virus that has been known to live outside the human body for days or even weeks in some environments. Therefore it is really important to make sure that none of your injecting equipment comes in contact with anyone else's blood.
- Never re-cap someone else's syringe (fit) and always clean up your own blood spills.
- Always dispose of your injecting equipment safely – an approved sharp safe / Fitpack is best or a rigid puncture proof container. Then take it to your nearest Clean Needle Program site.



WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HEP C?

When first infected with Hep C, only a few people (around 5%) notice any symptoms. For those who do experience symptoms they are usually described as 'flu-like'. Some people may have nausea, abdominal and back pain, and feel extreme tiredness. Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes) is not very common.

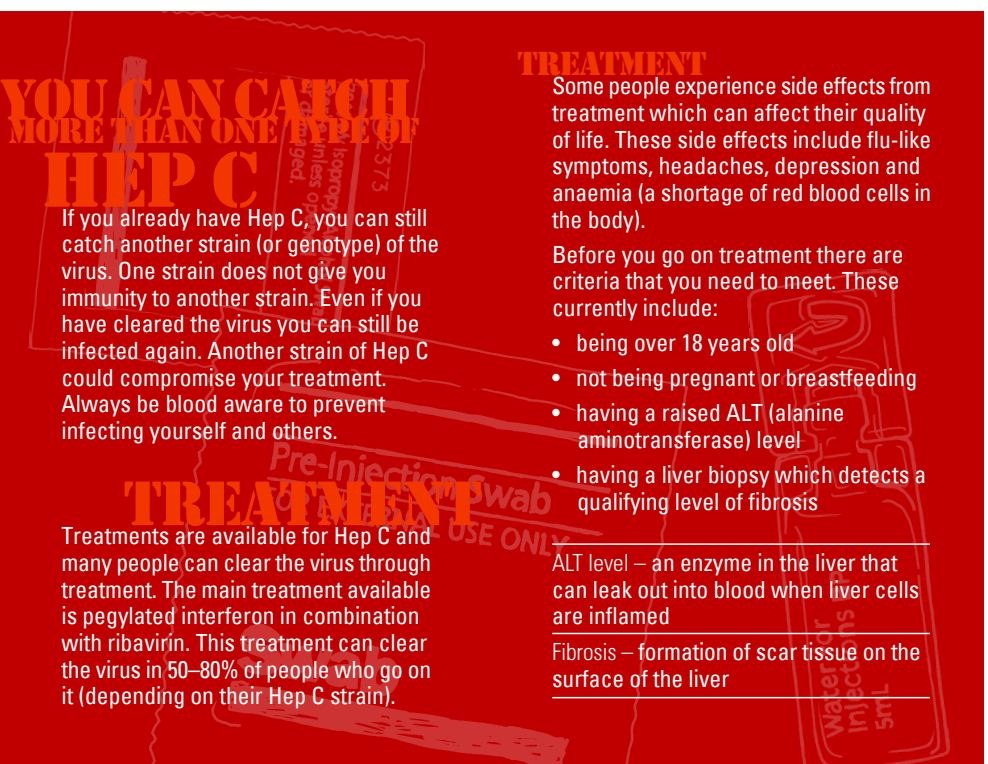
Most people with Hep C do not experience any symptoms for 10 to 15 years after first becoming infected, and some people will never experience symptoms. For those who do experience symptoms they can vary from person to person, ranging from mild to severe. The most common symptoms are fatigue, lethargy, depression and nausea.

TESTING

It's your choice whether to be tested or not. If you think you may have been at risk and would like to check, you can get a test from a GP or community health centre.

The first test is usually a Hepatitis C Antibody test. An antibody test shows the presence of antibodies in the blood. Around 25% of people clear Hep C naturally after becoming infected, but even these people will still test Hepatitis C Antibody positive. In order to find out if you have cleared the virus you need to have a PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) test, which is also known as a Hepatitis C RNA test.

- Hep C Antibody Test – a blood test that looks for antibodies to the virus.
- PCR Test – a blood test that looks for the actual presence of the virus.
- Liver Function Test – a blood test that monitors liver function.



YOU CAN CATCH MORE THAN ONE TYPE OF HEP C

If you already have Hep C, you can still catch another strain (or genotype) of the virus. One strain does not give you immunity to another strain. Even if you have cleared the virus you can still be infected again. Another strain of Hep C could compromise your treatment. Always be blood aware to prevent infecting yourself and others.

Treatments are available for Hep C and many people can clear the virus through treatment. The main treatment available is pegylated interferon in combination with ribavirin. This treatment can clear the virus in 50–80% of people who go on it (depending on their Hep C strain).

TREATMENT

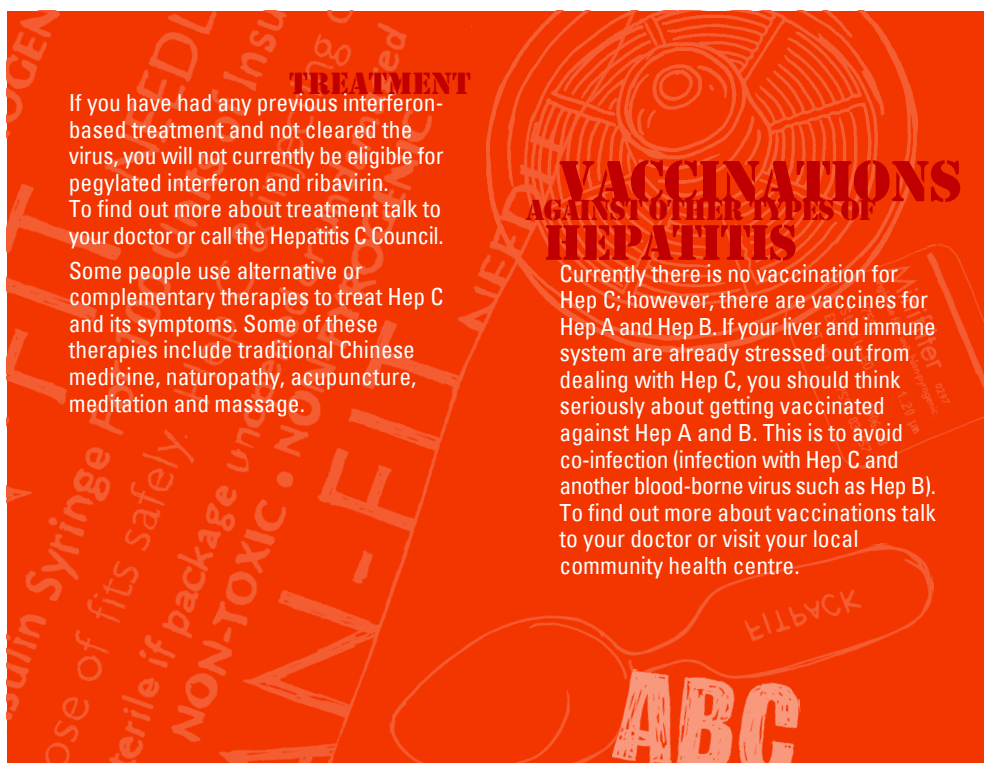
Some people experience side effects from treatment which can affect their quality of life. These side effects include flu-like symptoms, headaches, depression and anaemia (a shortage of red blood cells in the body).

Before you go on treatment there are criteria that you need to meet. These currently include:

- being over 18 years old
- not being pregnant or breastfeeding
- having a raised ALT (alanine aminotransferase) level
- having a liver biopsy which detects a qualifying level of fibrosis

ALT level – an enzyme in the liver that can leak out into blood when liver cells are inflamed

Fibrosis – formation of scar tissue on the surface of the liver



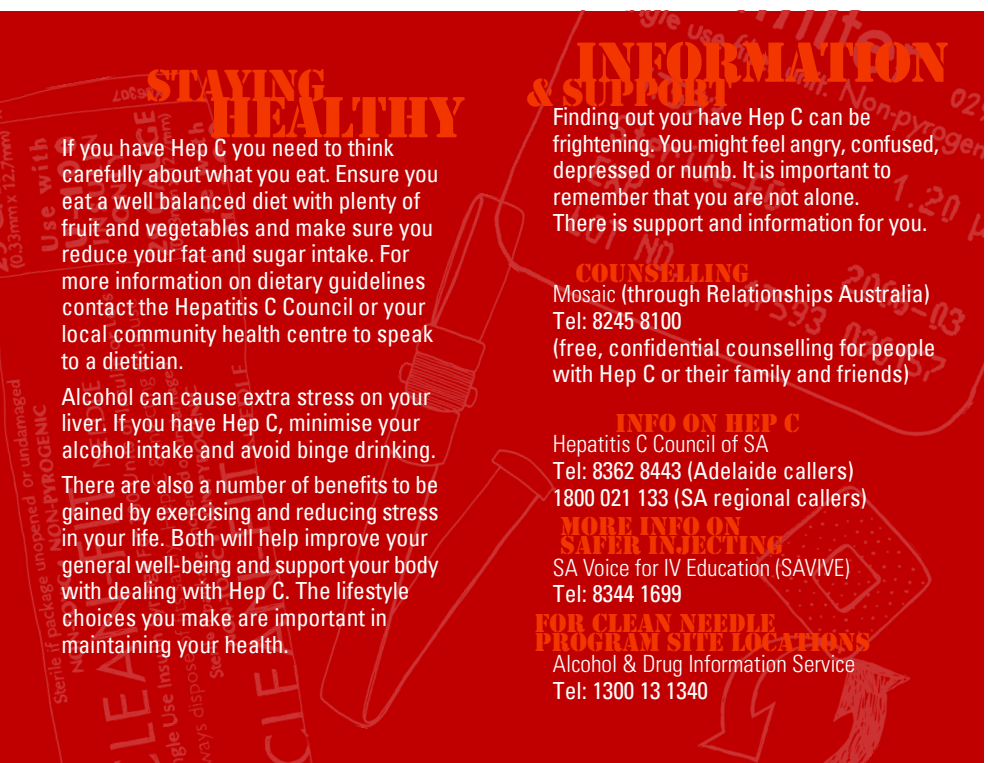
TREATMENT

If you have had any previous interferon-based treatment and not cleared the virus, you will not currently be eligible for pegylated interferon and ribavirin. To find out more about treatment talk to your doctor or call the Hepatitis C Council.

Some people use alternative or complementary therapies to treat Hep C and its symptoms. Some of these therapies include traditional Chinese medicine, naturopathy, acupuncture, meditation and massage.

VACCINATIONS AGAINST OTHER TYPES OF HEPATITIS

Currently there is no vaccination for Hep C; however, there are vaccines for Hep A and Hep B. If your liver and immune system are already stressed out from dealing with Hep C, you should think seriously about getting vaccinated against Hep A and B. This is to avoid co-infection (infection with Hep C and another blood-borne virus such as Hep B). To find out more about vaccinations talk to your doctor or visit your local community health centre.



STAYING HEALTHY

If you have Hep C you need to think carefully about what you eat. Ensure you eat a well balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables and make sure you reduce your fat and sugar intake. For more information on dietary guidelines contact the Hepatitis C Council or your local community health centre to speak to a dietitian.

Alcohol can cause extra stress on your liver. If you have Hep C, minimise your alcohol intake and avoid binge drinking. There are also a number of benefits to be gained by exercising and reducing stress in your life. Both will help improve your general well-being and support your body with dealing with Hep C. The lifestyle choices you make are important in maintaining your health.

INFORMATION & SUPPORT

Finding out you have Hep C can be frightening. You might feel angry, confused, depressed or numb. It is important to remember that you are not alone. There is support and information for you.

COUNSELLING
 Mosaic (through Relationships Australia)
 Tel: 8245 8100
 (free, confidential counselling for people with Hep C or their family and friends)

INFO ON HEP C
 Hepatitis C Council of SA
 Tel: 8362 8443 (Adelaide callers)
 1800 021 133 (SA regional callers)

MORE INFO ON SAFER INJECTING
 SA Voice for IV Education (SAVIVE)
 Tel: 8344 1699

FOR CLEAN NEEDLE PROGRAM SITE LOCATIONS
 Alcohol & Drug Information Service
 Tel: 1300 13 1340