

Information sheet about pathogens in humans

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is an inflammation of the liver caused by hepatitis C viruses. After infection, most people are initially either slightly ill or exhibit no symptoms. However, hepatitis C can persist for a long time (chronically) and lead to severe damage to the liver in the long term. It is estimated that around 3 in 1,000 people in Germany have chronic hepatitis C. As the infection does not always cause symptoms and those affected therefore remain unaware of their illness, the number of unreported cases is likely higher.

How is hepatitis C transmitted?

Hepatitis C viruses can be transmitted via the blood of infected people if it enters the bloodstream of another person. In Germany, this happens mainly in connection with drug use, such as through sharing needles with other people. Hepatitis C can also be transmitted via snorting tubes used to ingest drugs through the nose.

Very rarely, the viruses can also be transmitted during sex. This is most likely to occur via direct contact with blood through minor injuries. The injuries can be caused by certain sexual practices, sometimes even going unnoticed. The viruses can also be transmitted during menstruation if the blood comes into contact with the partner's minor wounds. If a pregnant woman is infected with the hepatitis C virus, the viruses can be transmitted to the child during pregnancy or during birth.

Hepatitis C viruses from the blood can survive outside the body for some time. Hence it is also possible to become infected via objects that come into contact with blood. This occurs in very rare cases in healthcare professions. The viruses are then transmitted through puncture wounds with surgical instruments or syringes, for example. Transmission is also possible via other objects that come into contact with blood. These include shared razor blades, nail scissors or toothbrushes, for example.

What symptoms do the sufferers show?

In the case of a hepatitis C infection, you may initially not notice any symptoms. But you may feel tired and have no appetite. You may feel pain in your head and limbs. Abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting may occur. You may also have a mild fever. Your skin and the whites of your eyes may turn yellow. This is called jaundice. Jaundice can cause the skin to itch severely. Urine may also turn dark and stools may look lighter than normal.

In up to 80 percent of those infected, however, the disease becomes chronic and then damages the liver in the long term. After a few years, the damage can lead to secondary diseases such as cirrhosis of the liver (advanced scarring and shrinking of the liver) and liver cell cancer.

What's the incubation period – and how long are you contagious?

After infection with the hepatitis C virus, it may take a few weeks or months before symptoms develop. You are contagious if you have hepatitis C viruses in your blood. That is true even if you have no symptoms or if the disease has already become chronic.

Who is particularly at risk?

People with a particularly high risk of contracting hepatitis C include:

- ▶ People who inject drugs and share the items required for this purpose. These include needles and syringes as well as filters, spoons or pans, water or tourniquets.
- ▶ People who have unprotected sex with different partners.
- ▶ People who engage in sexual practices with an increased risk of injury, such as anal intercourse.

In piercing and tattoo studios, though also in healthcare facilities in poorer countries, hygiene standards are sometimes lower than in Germany. Accordingly, the risk of infection is higher. For medical staff and patients who receive blood or blood products, the overall risk of infection is rather low.

The risk of a chronic course of hepatitis C varies greatly from person to person and depends on various circumstances. People with an HIV infection are at a higher risk of chronic hepatitis C and progressive liver disease.

HEPATITIS C

What should I do if I fall ill?

- ▶ A hepatitis C infection can be confirmed with a blood test.
- ▶ Hepatitis C can be treated with tablets and almost always cured.
- ▶ In the acute phase of the disease, you should avoid physical exertion as much as possible.
- ▶ It is particularly important to avoid alcohol.
- ▶ Always use condoms during sex, especially if you or your partner have hepatitis C. Use condoms even if you have no symptoms after an infection.
- ▶ Do not share objects with other people if there could be blood on them. This also includes razor blades, nail scissors and toothbrushes, for example.
- ▶ If you have injured yourself, ensure that the wound is treated hygienically. Inform the people treating you so that they can protect themselves with disposable gloves, for example.

Laboratories or doctors are required to report names to the Gesundheitsamt (health authority) if they suspect or discover that someone is infected with hepatitis C. If you work in the healthcare sector, you must inform your employer or the relevant occupational health service about your illness.

How can I protect myself?

Hygiene

- ▶ To protect yourself from being infected with hepatitis C during sex, you should use condoms.
- ▶ Syringes and other materials for drug consumption should not be used together.
- ▶ If you work in a profession with an increased risk of infection (for example, healthcare workers, sex workers, tattoo artists), special hygiene rules apply to protect against hepatitis C. Information on this can be obtained from your employer or from the relevant health authority.

Early testing

- ▶ As part of the health check from the age of 35, you can have a one-off test for hepatitis B and hepatitis C free of charge, even if you are not suspected of having the disease.
- ▶ If the risk of infection is particularly high, you should get tested at least once a year. This recommendation particularly applies to people who use drugs. Tests are offered at (for example) the health authorities' advice centres, at checkpoints or at Deutsche Aidshilfe centres, sometimes anonymously.

Preventive measures after contact or injury

- ▶ If infection is suspected, this should be diagnosed by a doctor. If need be, antiviral treatment can be commenced promptly.

There is **no vaccine** against hepatitis C. Having contracted the disease does not protect against re-infection with hepatitis C.

Where can I get more information?

The local health authority will be able to provide you with further advice. Other advice services are offered by Deutsche Aidshilfe, Checkpoints, drug help facilities and opioid substitution treatment doctors.

You can obtain advice and further information from the Federal Institute of Public Health (BIÖG) by telephone on 0221 – 89 20 31 or on the Internet at www.liebesleben.de.

Further (specialist) information can also be found on the Internet on the websites of the Robert Koch Institute (www.rki.de/hcv), the Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Healthcare (www.gesundheitsinformation.de/hepatitis-c.html) and Deutsche Leberhilfe e.V. (www.leberhilfe.org/lebererkrankungen/hepatitis-c-hcv/).



STEMPEL

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