

# HEPATITIS C & INJECTION DRUG USE

## What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a serious liver disease caused by the Hepatitis C virus. Some people get only a short term, or acute, infection and are able to clear the virus without treatment. If someone clears the virus, this usually happens within 6 months after infection. However, about 80% of people who get infected develop a chronic, or lifelong, infection. Over time, chronic Hepatitis C can cause serious health problems including liver damage, liver failure, and even liver cancer.

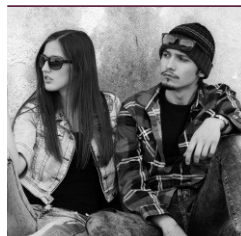
## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of Hepatitis C can include: fever, feeling tired, not wanting to eat, upset stomach, throwing up, dark urine, grey-colored stool, joint pain, and yellow skin and eyes. However, many people who get Hepatitis C do not have symptoms and do not know they are infected. If symptoms occur with acute infection, they can appear anytime from 2 weeks to 6 months after infection. Symptoms of chronic Hepatitis C can take decades to develop, and when symptoms do appear, they often are a sign of advanced liver disease.

## Should I get tested?

Yes. If you have ever injected drugs, you should get tested for Hepatitis C. If you are currently injecting, talk to your doctor about how often you should be tested.

The Hepatitis C Antibody Test is a blood test that looks for antibodies to the Hepatitis C virus. A reactive or positive Hepatitis C Antibody Test means that a person has been infected at some point in time. Unlike HIV, a reactive antibody test **does not** necessarily mean a person still has Hepatitis C. An additional blood test called a RNA test is needed to determine if a person is currently infected with Hepatitis C.



All equipment used to prepare and inject drugs can spread Hepatitis C when contaminated and shared.

## How is Hepatitis C spread among people who inject drugs?

The Hepatitis C virus is very infectious and can easily spread when a person comes into contact with surfaces, equipment, or objects that are contaminated with infected blood, even in amounts too small to see. The virus can survive on dry surfaces and equipment for up to 6 weeks. People who inject drugs can get Hepatitis C from:

- **Needles & Syringes.** Sharing or reusing needles and syringes increases the chance of spreading the Hepatitis C virus. Syringes with detachable needles increase this risk even more because they can retain more blood after they are used than syringes with fixed-needles.
- **Preparation Equipment.** Any equipment, such as cookers, cottons, water, ties, and alcohol swabs, can easily become contaminated during the drug preparation process.
- **Fingers.** Fingers that come into contact with infected blood can spread Hepatitis C. Blood on fingers and hands can contaminate the injection site, cottons, cookers, ties, and swabs.
- **Surfaces.** Hepatitis C can spread when blood from an infected person contaminates a surface and then that surface is reused by another person to prepare injection equipment.

*Continued on next page*

