



Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. Because you've tested positive for the virus, you will need to be referred to a specialist clinic, for example at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, or to a consultant gastroenterologist with an interest in viral hepatitis. You will receive an outpatient appointment so that further blood tests, an ultrasound scan and possibly a liver biopsy can be carried out.

Can I be cured?

It is possible for you to fight the infection and clear it from your body naturally. If your immune system is unable to fight off the virus, you may still be cured using medication. Some people may go on to develop mild to moderate liver damage and, in some cases, this can progress to cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver over 20–40 years, which can lead to liver failure or cancer of the liver.

How can I avoid passing on the virus?

You can prevent transmission to others by:

- not sharing needles or any other drug taking equipment;
- practising 'safe sex' by using condoms;
- not sharing personal toiletries such as a toothbrush, razor or nailbrush;
- only having tattoos or body piercing using sterile equipment;
- avoiding blood exposure by covering cuts with waterproof plasters until healed;
- not carrying a donor card, or donating blood, semen or blood products;
- cleaning any spilt blood on floors or work surfaces using household bleach.

If you have any worries about any possible risks, please discuss these with your nurse or doctor.

What can I do to help myself?

You should take steps to protect your liver against further damage:

Alcohol – alcohol consumption can speed up the progression of liver disease, so it is best to avoid drinking alcohol at all. If you feel you would have difficulty cutting out alcohol, or are usually a heavy drinker, please inform your nurse or doctor. They can arrange for help if needed.

Diet – you should aim to eat regular, well balanced meals.

Physical activity – you may be experiencing tiredness and lethargy as a direct result of the virus. Strenuous physical activity regimes are not recommended, but gentle physical activity that does not leave you feeling tired can be of benefit to your general wellbeing.

Medication – most medicines are considered safe, but you should always check product information and discuss any concerns with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Drug taking – some drugs can have a direct effect on your liver and its function. You will need to stop taking any street or recreational drugs before beginning a treatment programme. If you feel this could cause you problems or you would like some help, please inform your nurse or doctor. Remember, the more open you are with them, the better treatment and care you will receive.

Vaccination against hepatitis A and B, the annual flu, and pneumococcal infection are recommended.

What about hepatitis C and pregnancy?

If you are pregnant and have been diagnosed as hepatitis C positive, your specialist nurse can give you specific information.

Should I tell anyone about the virus?

Unfortunately, there is still some stigma surrounding hepatitis C, so please think carefully before telling people, but support from close family and friends can help.

Your hospital records are confidential and information to insurance companies etc can only be released on your authority.

You may not be obliged to tell your employer although you may wish to do so for support. Ultimately, it is your choice who you tell. Your nurse will be happy to discuss this with you.

Where can I get further information?

Clinical nurse specialists (hepatology)

Ward 6D, Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH)

Tel: 077 8888 3457 or 028 9063 3335

RVH Liver Support Group

Tel: 077 3771 8493

www.rvhliversupportgroup.org

Northern Ireland Hepatitis B and C Managed Clinical Network

www.hepbandcni.net

British Liver Trust (BLT)

Helpline: 0800 652 7330 (9am–5pm, Mon–Fri)

www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

Hepatitis C information line

Helpline: 0800 451 451 (8am–8pm, Mon–Fri; 10am–4pm, Sat–Sun)

Hepatitis C Trust

Tel: 0845 223 4424 (10.30am–4.30pm, Mon–Fri)

www.hepctrust.org.uk

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