

Hepatitis C in Antenatal Care - the facts

HEP C
U Later

What is Hep C?

Hepatitis C is a blood borne virus. It is transmitted when infected blood enters another person's blood stream. If left untreated it can cause liver disease, liver cancer and death.

Risk factors:

There are a number of risk factors for hepatitis C...

- **Sharing drug injecting equipment or other drug using equipment** (including syringes, needles, spoons, water or filters for drawing up, crack pipes, or snorting straws/notes).
- **Blood transfusion** before 1996.
- **Dental or medical treatment abroad** in unsterile conditions.
- **Piercing, tattoo, electrolysis, semi-permanent make up or acupuncture** using equipment which may have not been sterilised.
- **Vertical transmission** (from mother to baby during childbirth).
- **Unprotected sex with someone who may have had hepatitis C** (especially if there were opportunities for blood to blood contact during sex).
- **Needle stick injury.**

Symptoms:

Not everyone experiences symptoms of an early hepatitis C infection. Symptoms can be misinterpreted as another illness.

Jaundice (yellowing of eyes and skin)

Feeling sick/ vomiting

Tiredness

Loss of appetite

Abdominal pain

High temperature (above 38C)

Hepatitis C Elimination:

There is currently a global goal of eliminating hepatitis by 2030. You can listen to the work that NHS England are doing to reach hepatitis C elimination in the podcast our Programme lead Deanne Burch recorded with Mark Gillyon-Powell, the Head of Programme for the HCV Elimination for NHS England [here](#).



Did you know:

There are 6 main types of hepatitis C known as genotypes.

Some genotypes are more common in different areas of the world. All genotypes can be treated.

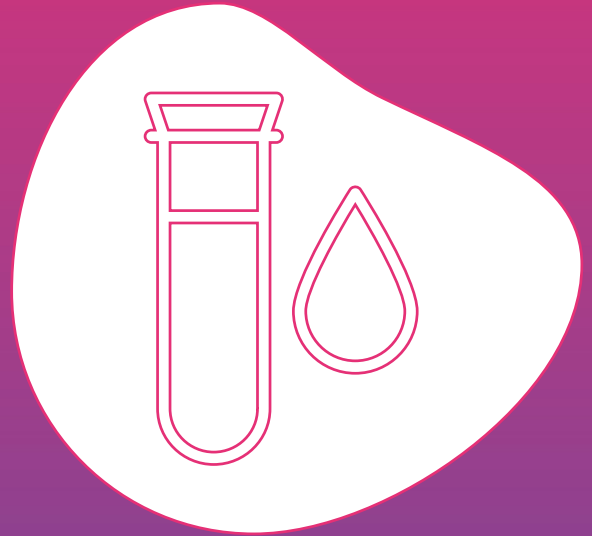
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Testing:

There are different ways to get tested. Testing is easy and the time to get results can vary depending on the method of testing used. If a person has been exposed to hepatitis C it can take up to 3 months before there is a hepatitis C antibody positive result. In some cases it can take up to 6 months.

Test 3 months after a potential exposure to the virus, then 3 months after that. If a person remains at risk from hepatitis C it's good practice to test them every 12 months. If a person has a positive hepatitis C result, in some cases, further tests and investigations may be required.



Hepatitis C testing in pregnancy:

Unfortunately not a lot is known about how common hepatitis C is amongst women who are pregnant. This is why NHS England are currently implementing pilots to undertake additional screening. Some studies confirm an antenatal seroprevalence in London between 0.5 -1%.

Screening for Hepatitis C (HCV) is not currently routine practice in England and people tend to be tested if they have come into contact with a risk factor. However, sometimes people do not know when they may have come into contact with a risk factor and this can lead to missed opportunities for identifying the virus.

What are some of the benefits of testing for hepatitis C during pregnancy?

Hepatitis C testing during pregnancy can mean additional reassurance for a person if the result is negative. If the result is positive this can mean plans can be put in place to support the person to access treatment at the appropriate time, and can enable further opportunities for engaging partners or other children who may have been affected to access a test.



What are the risks if a baby is born when their mother has hepatitis C?

During birth children are at risk of acquiring a hepatitis C transmission if their mother is hepatitis C positive at the time the child is born (known as vertical transmission). The risk of longer-term harm is likely compounded if the mother is undiagnosed, as the baby cannot be actively followed up and assessed for testing and treatment.

Are there any adverse outcomes if a person has hepatitis C during pregnancy?

Although neither hepatitis B or C pass the placental barriers, the inflammation the viruses cause can affect the pregnancy and result in negative pregnancy outcomes. Hepatitis C has been linked to adverse pregnancy outcomes, such as a heightened risk for gestational hypertension, preterm birth and low birth weight.

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What the testing results mean:

Roughly 25% of people who acquire a hepatitis C infection spontaneously clear the virus in the first 6 months, however, 75% go on to develop chronic hepatitis C. Spontaneous clearance is where the body's immune system automatically fights the virus.

Hep C Antibody positive + Hep C RNA negative = Previously came into contact with hepatitis C, does not have current infection

Hep C Antibody negative + Hep C RNA negative = Has not come into contact with the hepatitis C virus

Hep C Antibody positive + Hep C RNA positive = Has the active hepatitis C virus

There may be some cases when a person may have had hepatitis C virus where the hepatitis C antibody is not picked up on some forms of testing.

If a person has had successful treatment, or has cleared the virus spontaneously, they are not protected from being infected if they come into contact with the virus again - it's important to reduce the risk of coming into contact with the virus again.

Hepatitis C results in pregnancy

Women who have been previously treated for hepatitis C may remain hepatitis C antibody positive for many years but will be hepatitis C PCR (RNA) negative and therefore have no risk of transmitting the virus. After successful treatment or 'spontaneous clearance' hepatitis C does not "re-activate" and further positive RNA results would mean they have been re-infected.

If a person is tested whilst pregnant and is positive should it be reported anywhere?

Yes, hepatitis C is a notifiable disease and is therefore reported to UKHSA.

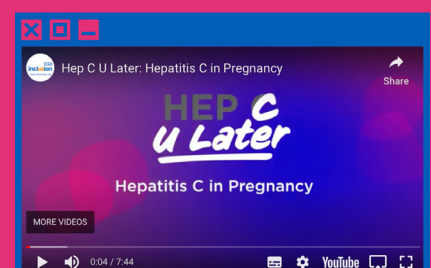


Co-infection with HIV:

Untreated HIV infection increases the risk of transmission of hepatitis C. Reassuringly most people diagnosed with HIV/hepatitis C co-infection prior to pregnancy will have received curative hepatitis C treatment and be on suppressive antiretroviral therapy for HIV.



If a pregnant person can't have hepatitis C treatment why is it important to test for hepatitis C? [Watch this video](#) to find out why it's essential.



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Breastfeeding:

Breastfeeding should still be encouraged if a person is only infected with hepatitis C. If a person has a co-infection of hepatitis C and HIV discussions around breast feeding should be in conjunction with the HIV team and Trust guidance should be followed.

Treatment:

Hepatitis C can be cured with Direct Acting Antiviral treatments (DAAs).

They are effective 90-95% of the time (usually one tablet a day for 8-12 weeks). Treatment is available to everyone. 12 weeks after a person finishes their treatment a viral load/Hep C RNA test will be taken to check if the virus has been eliminated from their system.

Treatment in pregnancy and for children:

Hepatitis C treatment is not generally given during pregnancy and they are not approved for use during pregnancy. However, treatment can be started once the baby has been born. The medicines have not been tested during pregnancy and therefore it is advised that people do not become pregnant if they are already taking hepatitis C treatment.

Children from 3 years of age, can be cured in 8-12 weeks using oral combination therapy and DAAs.

About 20% of infants will clear the infection spontaneously, typically in the first 3 years of life. The rest will require hepatitis C treatment, usually with very slow disease progression rates.

There is a specialist National Paediatric Operational Delivery Network who provide the treatment and any other investigations required to children who have acquired the virus. You can contact them on national.hcvpmdt@nhs.net.



What happens if a person is found to be hepatitis C positive when pregnant?

A mother who is hepatitis C antibody positive and hepatitis C PCR (RNA) positive should be reviewed by the Specialist Midwife and/or a Consultant Hepatologist within 6 weeks or by 24 weeks gestation (whichever is sooner).

How do I find out more information?

- **Hep C U Later** – for queries and further resources & information (you can also email connect.HepCULater@mpft.nhs.uk)
- **The Hepatitis C Trust** – for support for anyone affected by hepatitis C
- **NHS Choices** – for more information about hepatitis C
- **British Liver Trust** – for more information about the liver

