



HEPATITIS C

WHAT IS IT

It is an infection caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). This virus causes inflammation of the liver (hepatitis). About one in four people recover from the infection spontaneously. Other people develop chronic hepatitis C. Six out of ten people with chronic hepatitis C eventually progress to other liver disorders: fibrous nodules (cirrhosis) or cancer.

HOW IT MANIFESTS

Eight out of ten people have no symptoms. The average time between transmission of the infection and the onset of the first symptoms is 2 to 24 weeks. Symptoms are not specific and may include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, gray or white stools, joint pain, dark urine, yellow skin or eyes (jaundice).

HOW IT IS TRANSMITTED

HCV is transmitted mainly through contact with blood. However, during the acute phase, in the first weeks, it can also be transmitted through contact with sperm, rectal mucus and nasal fluid. HCV survives outside the body for up to 3 weeks, maintaining the ability to transmit the infection.

HCV can be transmitted through:

- anal sex without using a condom (in group sex, a new condom for each partner);
- fisting practices (inserting the hand beyond the knuckle into the anus or vaginal) without gloves or not using a new glove when changing partners;
- sharing a container of lubricant during group anal sex and fisting;
- sharing equipment for internal rectal washing (douching or enema);
- sharing equipment for inhaling drugs (including a tube, note or a popper bottle, if placed into the nostril);
- sharing equipment for injecting substances (including steroids);
- sharing equipment (pipes, for example) to smoke drugs that cause cuts or burns on the lips (crack or methamphetamine, for example);
- piercings or tattoos when the equipment is not sterile;
- having received blood or organ transfusions or having undergone surgery in Portugal before 1992;
- being on long-term hemodialysis;
- blood-to-blood contact in the workplace (medical professionals or caregivers in general).

In Portugal, blood and/or organ donations after 1992 do not transmit HCV because all people who donate are screened. Surgeries do not transmit HCV, since in Portugal the equipment used is sterilized and for single use.

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED

The rapid test looks for antibodies (defenses) in a small blood sample. All infected people have antibodies after 24 weeks; before that they may not have enough to be detected in the rapid test. A non-reactive result indicates that there has been no infection for more than 24 weeks. A reactive result indicates that there has been contact with HCV, but rapid tests do not distinguish between an old/treated/spontaneously cured infection and a current/untreated infection. The tests that confirm a current/to-be-treated infection are blood tests for the virus.

HOW IT IS TREATED

One in four infected adults resolves the infection without treatment. Treatment is with antiviral medications, lasting between 8 and 16 weeks and with little or no side effects. The cure rate is over 97%. Treatment and healthcare for people with hepatitis C are free of charge through the National Health Service (SNS).

HOW IT IS PREVENTED

Do not share consumables: people who use drugs should use single-use materials to prevent the contamination with the virus.

Do not share personal items that may contain blood: razors and toothbrushes may contain blood and should be for personal use. Do not share lubricant or sex toys without condoms during group sex.

Condoms: use a condom on the penis and on sex toys during vaginal or anal penetration. If you have group sex, use a new condom when changing partners. Since HCV can be transmitted through contact between sperm or rectal mucus and blood, it is recommended to use a condom during anal sex.

Gloves: use gloves during fisting. If you have group sex, use a new glove when changing partners.

Regular testing: regular screening can result in early detection and treatment, preventing the transmission of the infection. Screening for hepatitis C is recommended every 3-6 months when high-risk situations occur depending on the individual risk assessment and in cases of active use of inhaled/injected drugs or sex work.

Reviewed by the GAT Health Coordination on 05/2026. The information in this leaflet is not intended to replace guidance given by healthcare professionals regarding prevention, diagnosis, and treatment choices.

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