

Hepatitis C Testing

Q: What is Hepatitis C?

A: Hepatitis C is a blood-borne viral infection. It is recognised as a significant public health problem world-wide. In England it is estimated that there are approximately 200,000 people chronically infected and the majority of these are unaware of their infection.

Q: How can it be caught?

A: Rarely can hepatitis C be passed on through other body fluids. Drug users sharing needles are particularly at risk. Anyone whose blood has come into contact with the blood of someone infected with the hepatitis C virus is also at risk.

Q: How serious is it?

A: Approximately 20% of people will fight the hepatitis C infection and naturally clear it from their bodies within two to six months. Of the rest some will remain well, and never develop liver damage but many will develop mild to moderate liver damage (with or without symptoms). A further 20% will progress to cirrhosis of the liver over a period of 20- 30 years. Excessive drinking of alcohol is often associated with increased likelihood of progression to severe liver complications.

Q: Can it be treated?

A: There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C but treatment can clear the infection in approximately half those infected. There is currently no vaccine against hepatitis C, so prevention of new infections is particularly important. There are increasingly effective antiviral drug treatments available that have been approved by The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE). However lifestyle changes, in particular decreasing alcohol intake, can delay hepatitis C causing serious liver disease.

UK's National Strategy:

Chief Medical Officer, has published the Hepatitis C Action Plan for England.

The Government made a commitment to tackle hepatitis C when the Chief Medical Officer published his infectious diseases strategy, Getting Ahead of the Curve.

The Department of Health consulted on proposals to strengthen services for prevention, diagnosis and treatment and improve epidemiological surveillance and research.

Sir Liam said:

"Hepatitis C has emerged as an important public health challenge over recent years, which requires intensified action to improve its prevention, diagnosis and treatment."

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However some ethnic minority groups have increased risks

"South Asian people are at increased risk of hepatitis C infection. It can take many years or even decades for symptoms to appear, and if left untreated can lead to liver damage and premature death. The good news is that there is effective treatment that can help many people. So ***it's vital that people who may have been at risk of infection seek medical advice and get tested.***"

The publication of the Hepatitis C Action Plan for England includes the launch of a professional awareness campaign with an information pack being sent out to primary care professionals. This will provide health professionals with essential facts about hepatitis C and assist them in offering advice about hepatitis C and assist them in offering advice about hepatitis C and testing to patients who may have been at risk of infection.

Why get tested?

To determine if you have contracted the hepatitis C virus and to monitor treatment of the infection

When to get tested?

If you are at risk.

If you may have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus, such as through contact with infected blood or sexual relations with an infected person.