

## Hepatitis C

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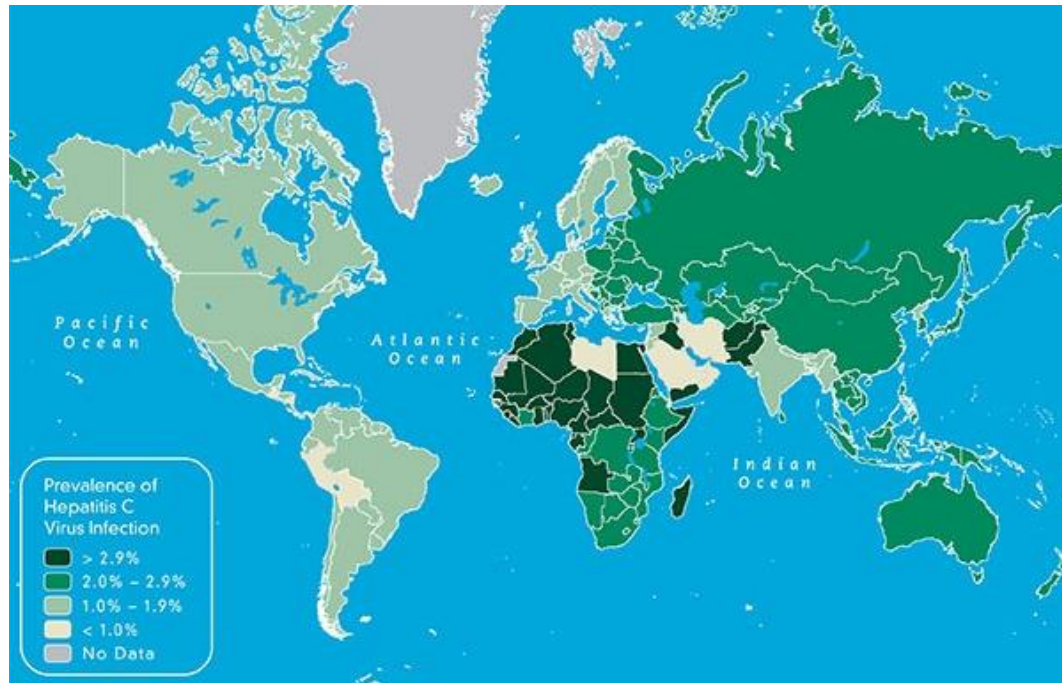
### What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that can damage your liver and cause severe, sometimes fatal, health problems. It spreads in the same way as HIV - direct contact with infected blood and body fluids.

### Where is it?

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is found all over the world, but is more common in parts of Africa, Asia and South America:

### Worldwide Hepatitis C Infection



[View larger image \(opens in new window\)](#)

Map courtesy of US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011

Approximately 170 million people worldwide (3% of the world's population) are believed to be infected.

### How can I get it?

You can get HCV after contact with infected blood and body fluids. In places where HCV is more common, any procedure that pierces your skin can put you at risk. This includes acupuncture, tattoos and medical or dental treatment. Sex without a condom also increases your risk.

In most wealthy countries like Britain, blood for [transfusion](#) and other blood products are tested for HCV, HIV and hepatitis B. Other countries may not have the resources to check blood and blood products for these viruses.

In Britain, HCV mainly spreads by people sharing dirty needles and syringes when they inject illegal drugs.

### Signs and Symptoms

Around 80% of people with HCV do not become unwell initially. If you do get ill, symptoms start about seven weeks after exposure to the virus and include:

- loss of appetite
- mild fever (temperature)
- nausea and vomiting
- stomach pain
- yellow skin and eyes (called jaundice)
- dark urine and pale stools (faeces)

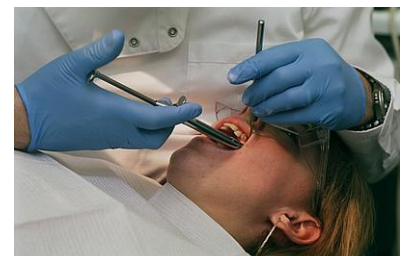
You can go on to develop liver problems - either immediate liver failure (which is usually fatal) or more commonly, long-term liver disease. Even if you have a mild illness and appear fully recover, you can still develop liver failure or cancer in the future, as the virus can continue to multiply and damage your liver. This happens to 70 - 80% of people with HCV. Since you can remain infectious for years, you could pass HCV on to anyone in contact with your body fluids.

HCV is the main reason for people needing a [liver transplant](#) in the United States and is thought to be the second most common reason in the UK.

### What is my risk?

The chance of catching HCV is low for most travellers. HCV is not a 'typical' travel disease. However, your behaviour can increase your risk.

Risk activities include:



- Medical or dental treatment in areas where HCV is more common.
- Using blood-contaminated needles and syringes - if you inject illegal drugs, your risk is very high.
- Acupuncture, tattooing, body piercing or any procedure that pierces your skin.
- Receiving a blood transfusion in a country that is not able to check blood for HCV.
- Unprotected sex.

### Can it be treated?

Drugs called [interferon](#) and [ribavirin](#), can be prescribed by a specialist liver doctor. This combination of drugs can clear the virus completely, and happens in approximately half the people with chronic infection. It is usually more successful in people with certain strains of HCV. Even if this treatment does not clear the virus, it usually slows down the development of liver damage and cancer. However, these drugs are not suitable for everyone with HCV and should only be given with careful medical supervision.

If you have extensive liver damage after years of infection, such as cirrhosis, a liver transplant may be needed.

### How can I reduce my risk?

There is no vaccine to prevent HCV. Avoiding risky activities is the only way to not get HCV. This will also help prevent exposure to other blood borne viruses, such as hepatitis B and HIV.

- Never get acupuncture, body piercing or tattoos overseas
- Whenever possible avoid medical or dental treatment overseas – if treatment is essential, try to ensure sterile equipment is used.
- Never share razors, nail scissors or toothbrushes.
- Use a condom during sex.
- If you are going to places that do not have adequate medical care, take a sterile medical kit.
- Cover wounds, especially if playing sport
- Do not use illegal drugs. If you must take drugs; **NEVER** share needles or syringes.



### Links:

[British Liver Trust: Hepatitis C](#)  
[Health Protection Agency: Hepatitis C](#)  
[Hepatitis C Trust: Living with Hepatitis C](#)  
[NHS Choices: Hepatitis C – Get tested. Get treated.](#)  
[NHS Choices: Hepatitis C – Treatment.](#)