POCKET KNOWLEDGE |
Hepatitis

STOPHEP
Information
ELIMINATING HEPATITIS C TOGETHER



Englisch

Knowledge protects:
Liver health and hepatitis C

MiMi Das Gesundheitsprojekt Mit Migranten für Migranten

Ethno-Medizinisches Zentrum e.V.

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Stay healthy!

Across the globe, up to 3,000 people die of hepatitis-related diseases every day. Hepatitis C is one of the main causes of liver cirrhosis and liver cancer.

If the infection is detected early, however, hepatitis C can be completely cured in most cases. Because the transmission pathways of hepatitis C are socially stigmatised, and because the infection can remain without symptoms for a long time, many of those affected don't even know they're infected. A simple blood test can provide certainty.

GP practices and testing services provide information about personal infection risk, about the test, and about treatment options to people seeking assistance.

Don't be shy – go see a doctor! Hepatitis C infection can be completely cured if the affected person seeks information, gets tested, and accepts treatment at an early stage. This brochure on hepatitis C offers a helping hand.

What does hepatitis C have to do with me?

- There are reasons why I may have hepatitis C infection, even though I am not aware of any risk.
- It could have severe long-term effects.
- Today, there is a simple and effective treatment, with very good chances of a cure.
- The test is simple and free of charge.
- I'll get tested at the next opportunity, just to be sure!

What's so special about hepatitis C?

- Hepatitis C often remains undetected, but can cause severe illness decades later, and even be fatal.
- The history of transmission pathways and the frequency of transmission vary across world regions.
- Infection may have occurred a long time ago, and the causes may be unexpected: it often happens that a person has no idea they could have been in a risk situation for hepatitis C at some point in their past.
- The prospects of a cure have improved a lot in recent years, and are now extremely good.
- Information, testing, and treatment can save lives!

Worth noting:

The Robert Koch Institute estimates that, in industrialised countries, 70 to 80% of chronic liver inflammation cases and 60% of liver cell tumours (liver cancer) can be attributed to chronic hepatitis C infection. Hepatitis C is the stated cause of 63% of all liver transplantations in Europe.

Becoming informed about hepatitis C is therefore particularly important: the earlier the illness is detected, the better are the chances of a cure.

A versatile organ we really must protect: the liver

The liver is the most important organ in the body's metabolic system: it is involved in about 500 different metabolic processes. A multitude of vital functions makes the liver an indispensable organ. In contrast to the heart and kidneys, the liver can't be replaced by medical devices. If the liver becomes ill, this has a massive impact on health. It is therefore important to avoid it being damaged.

The liver's main functions include:



Detoxification: the liver filters harmful substances such as alcohol, nicotine, and medications from the blood, and converts them into harmless ones. These are then excreted via the faeces and urine.



Metabolism: the liver processes the building blocks of proteins obtained from the food in such a way that they can be used to generate energy. The bile produced by the liver is needed to digest and absorb fats and vitamins.



Storage facility: like a pantry, the liver can store sugar, vitamins, and trace elements such as iron, copper, manganese, and zinc. It then releases them back to the body when required.



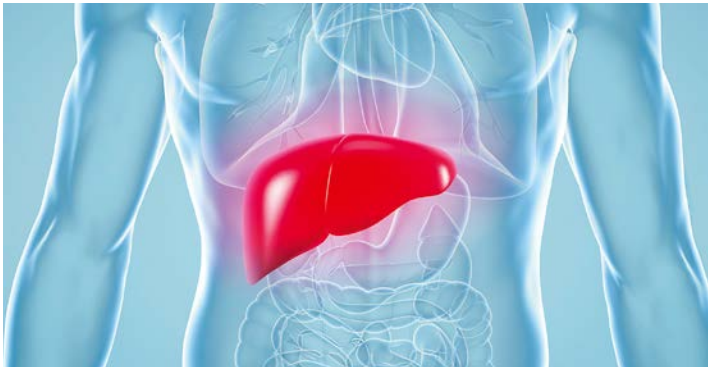
Breaking down and making blood: old blood cells are broken down, and a range of proteins needed for blood coagulation are produced in the liver.

What kinds of illness affect the liver?

Liver disease is one of the greatest global health problems. In Germany alone, more than 5 million people are affected by acute or chronic diseases of the liver, including their long-term consequences.

Liver function can be affected by infections, harmful substances (e.g. alcohol, medications, nicotine), and injuries. Most commonly, the liver suffers from inflammation, which can be caused by:

- Viral infections (with hepatitis A, B, C, D, or E virus)
- Non-viral infections (with bacteria, parasites, and/or fungi)
- Autoimmune diseases (e.g. autoimmune hepatitis)
- Inflammation of the bile ducts



The good news is that the liver can self-heal and regenerate to a certain degree. Unhealthy lifestyle factors and persistent stress, however, can damage it severely.

Diseases of the liver, such as an infection with hepatitis C virus (HCV), often cause no or only general complaints, such as fatigue, a drop in performance, and a sensation of pressure in the upper right abdomen. To recognise these is the first step towards keeping the liver healthy.

Hepatitis C: when the liver becomes inflamed

Hepatitis C is an inflammation of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus.

When an infection with hepatitis C doesn't heal spontaneously and persists for longer than six months, it is called chronic hepatitis C. It means that the liver is permanently inflamed. This is the case in 60 to 85% of all infections with hepatitis C virus. Around 58 million people worldwide have chronic hepatitis C infection. In Europe, this number is 12.5 million.

If left untreated, chronic hepatitis C can lead to scarring (liver fibrosis) and, consequently, to shrinking of the liver (liver cirrhosis). Because of the scar tissue and the shrinkage, the liver can then no longer carry out its functions fully.
Liver cirrhosis and its consequences, such as liver cancer, can be fatal.

Worth noting:

Chronic hepatitis C can also affect other organs and tissues. Manifestations include diseases of the eyes, kidney disease, neuropsychiatric disorders, pulmonary fibrosis, skin disease, thyroid disease, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic disorders.

How do you know you have hepatitis C?

If the symptoms are recognised in time, the disease can be treated and even cured quickly, and the treatment is generally well tolerated. This is why it is so important for the public to become informed. Particularly at risk are:

- People who use drugs
- People in custodial settings
- People from regions where hepatitis C is more common, such as the Eastern Mediterranean, Eastern Europe, and Africa, as well as Central and Eastern Asia
- People who received a blood transfusion before blood products were routinely tested for hepatitis C (in Germany before 1991).

People with chronic hepatitis C often remain free of any health complaints for a long time, or only experience general symptoms, such as:

- Fatigue
- Decreased performance and listlessness
- Discomfort in the upper abdomen
- Joint pain
- Weight gain/weight loss
- Difficulty concentrating.

If these complaints persist, medical advice should be sought. The preventive health checks offered by statutory health insurance assist with the early detection of disease.

You can use the University of Schleswig-Holstein's 'Liver-Check' questionnaire to assess your own risk of liver disease. Of course, such a self-test can only give an indication, and cannot replace a medical consultation. You can find the questionnaire (in German) on the internet at www.ndr.de/ratgeber/gesundheit/Test-Wie-gesund-ist-Ihre-Leber,quiz14778.html



How is the hepatitis C virus transmitted?

The hepatitis C virus is mainly transmitted through blood-to-blood contact (which sometimes goes unnoticed). Transmission can occur even if a very small amount of infected blood, invisible to the naked eye, enters the bloodstream of an uninfected person.

The hepatitis C virus is not transmitted by breastmilk, sharing food and drinks, or through social contact. It is perfectly safe to share crockery, cutlery, the shower, toilet, and the bed with an infected person.

The hepatitis C virus and how it is transmitted was only discovered in the late 1980s. It spread undetected until then, e.g. among people who inject or snort drugs.

Transmission also occurred in the health system. For example, via blood transfusions during births and operations, and in the course of public health campaigns. One of these was the schistosomiasis treatment campaign that took place in Egypt from the 1950s to the 1980s.

This means that people may have become infected with hepatitis C in the past, without the infection ever being noticed or detected by a test.

The social stigma attached to drug use has also become associated with hepatitis C to some degree. This has made the infection a taboo topic, sometimes even within the health system. This is another reason why the infection sometimes remains undetected.

A personal story

A 35-year-old man from Russia has been living in Germany for 15 years. During the first few years, he found it hard to find his way in the new country, and he joined different social groups.

It was a confusing time of stopping and starting vocational training, and of moving from place to place, as well as of alcohol use, masculinity rituals, and peer pressure. He has left all this behind long ago and now wants to enjoy the security his orderly life offers.

When his doctor asks him during his health check whether he ever used drugs, he hesitates. He's not even sure whether he participated in or only witnessed these things in his past. And he is worried about losing the respect of others if he talks about it. It was helpful for him that his doctor asked him directly and sympathetically, and explained her exact reason for asking.

Lowering the risk of infection

The risk of infection is low if certain rules are followed. These include precautions that avoid contact with foreign blood, and blood-to-blood contact:

- No sharing of needles and syringes, straws, or other drug use utensils.
- Making sure that your chosen tattoo or piercing studio, nail or hair salon works under strict hygienic conditions.
- Using condoms for sexual intercourse if there is a risk of coming into contact with blood.
- Using protective gloves – especially in the healthcare professions – to reduce the risk in case of bleeding or needle stick injury.

Options for diagnosis and testing

Who should get tested?

- Persons who have spent part of their lives in regions of the world where hepatitis C is more common. This applies, for example, to Eastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, Africa, and Central and East Asia.
- Persons who ever had a tattoo or piercing done, and who are unsure whether the procedure was performed under sterile conditions. While in custody, for example, or in a part of the world where they couldn't be certain.
- Persons who are in close contact with someone with hepatitis C infection.
- Persons who ever injected or snorted drugs (snorting = inhaling through the nose using a small tube or straw), or who were ever injected with drugs by someone else. People often don't, or don't like to, remember these events – especially if they only happened rarely, or a long time ago. For fear of being shunned or discriminated against because of the association between hepatitis C and drugs, those affected often hesitate to say why they want to get tested. Their choice should be respected.
- Persons living with HIV, or who have multiple sexual partners.
- People in custodial settings, because there are many possibilities of becoming infected there.
- Persons who have received a blood transfusion before blood products were routinely tested for hepatitis C (in Germany before 1991)

Worth noting:

A hepatitis C infection that has healed does not protect effectively from becoming infected again!

What do I need to know about the test?

A range of testing methods are available to clearly detect hepatitis C. A test can confirm infection from about six weeks after the possible transmission event.

Antibody testing: the hepatitis C antibody test detects whether a person ever had hepatitis C infection. If the antibody test is negative, the person never in their life had hepatitis C. The test may also be negative if the infection occurred recently. If the antibody test is positive, then the person either successfully recovered from hepatitis C infection at some point in their lives, or they still have chronic infection. A PCR test is used to clarify this.

PCR test: the PCR test for hepatitis C shows whether the virus's genetic material is currently present in the blood, i.e. whether the virus is continuing to multiply.
If the PCR test is negative, even though the antibody test was positive, the hepatitis C infection has resolved spontaneously. The person can then no longer transmit the virus to others.
If the PCR test is positive, the hepatitis C infection is still active, and can be treated.

Hepatitis C testing can be performed at GP practices, at the Gesundheitsamt (public health authority), some Aidshilfe (AIDS service organisation) checkpoints, and at other information and counselling services. The Gesundheitsamt (public health authority), the Leberhilfe e. V. (German Liver Patients' Association), and the Deutsche Aidshilfe e. V. (the German AIDS service organisation) can help find local testing services.

The costs of hepatitis C testing are generally covered by statutory health insurance. Testing is most often conducted anonymously (without names). Only the local Gesundheitsamt (public health authority) must receive personal details. This is because of a legal duty to notify certain diseases. Nobody else needs to find out about the test result.

Free hepatitis screening as part of the adult health check

Since the autumn of 2021, general hepatitis B and C screening is part of the 'Vorsorgeuntersuchung für Erwachsene' (adult preventive health check, formerly known as 'Check-Up 35'). As part of this preventive health check, all persons with statutory health insurance cover can be tested once free of charge for hepatitis B and C. In addition, hepatitis B vaccination status is checked, and a vaccination dose may be recommended. No vaccination is available yet for hepatitis C.

Insured persons 35 years and older whose last preventive health check took place between 2018 and 2020 can still take up the newly introduced hepatitis B and C testing offer as part of a catch-up provision.



Treating hepatitis C

The aim of hepatitis C treatment is to permanently remove the virus from the body. Until a few years ago, treatment sometimes lasted for over a year, and most patients had to contend with sometimes severe side effects.

Thanks to modern and well-tolerated medications, the chances of curing hepatitis C infection are above 95% today. The medication is taken in the form of tablets, and, in most cases, over a manageable period of 8 to 12 weeks.
The treatment contributes to those affected feeling fitter, and to the health consequences caused by hepatitis C being avoided.

The new drugs used to treat hepatitis C offer good chances of a cure, even to those who have experienced unsuccessful treatment in the past.
People who use alcohol and other drugs, who receive drug substitution treatment, and those who are living with HIV, kidney disease, or liver cirrhosis, can also be treated successfully today.

A personal story

A doctor detects elevated levels of liver enzymes in a 75-year-old woman. Among other diagnostics, he suggests a test for hepatitis C.
The woman reacts with shock. Outraged, she asserts that she has never taken drugs.
The doctor explains that, before 1991, hepatitis C was also transmitted through blood products.
She says that she has never received any. During the ensuing conversation, however, it turns out that she had 'jaundice' after a caesarean section in 1975.
The doctor explains that she may have received a blood transfusion during the birth – without ever being told about it.

Both her antibody and PCR tests are positive: she has chronic hepatitis C. After treatment, her PCR test is negative, and her liver enzymes are returning to normal levels.



Further information and support services

The Gesundheitsamt (public health authority) near your place of residence also offers information and support. You can find the telephone number of your local Gesundheitsamt (public health authority) at
www.rki.de/mein-gesundheitsamt

The Deutsche Leberhilfe e. V. (German Liver Patients' Association) provides information and advice, offers an online liver self-test, and maintains a comprehensive referral directory of hospitals, specialist medical practices, counselling services, and support groups on its website at
www.leberhilfe.org
Email: info@leberhilfe.de

The internet pages of Deutsche Aidshilfe e. V. (the German AIDS service organisation) offer lots of information and counselling services at
www.aidshilfe.de/hepatitis
Online counselling service by email or chat:
www.aidshilfe-beratung.de

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