

Hepatitis C Factsheet

It is estimated that 150 million people are chronically infected with hepatitis C. The disease kills an estimated 700,000 people each year, the vast majority of whom live in developing countries where there is little or no access to diagnosis and treatment for the disease. While hepatitis C is found worldwide, Africa and Central and East Asia are the most affected regions.

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). The virus can cause both acute and chronic infection, ranging in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to serious, lifelong illness. Infected people often do not show symptoms for many years. Hepatitis C is also a leading co-infection affecting people living with HIV/AIDS, who are more vulnerable to the disease because of their weaker immune systems and because HIV and hepatitis C share common modes of transmission. More than two million people with HIV worldwide are estimated to be co-infected with hepatitis C.

Transmission: A blood-borne virus, hepatitis C is most commonly transmitted through unsafe injection practices, reuse or inadequate sterilization of medical equipment, and the transfusion of unscreened blood and blood products.

Signs and symptoms: While approximately 80 per cent of people do not exhibit symptoms after initial infection, those with acute infection may experience fever, fatigue, decreased appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, joint pain and jaundice.

Diagnosis: As infection is usually asymptomatic, few people are diagnosed during the acute phase of the disease and remain undiagnosed until symptoms develop secondary to liver damage – often decades after infection. Serological tests are used to screen for anti-HCV antibodies.

Treatment: Hepatitis C treatment is rapidly changing; new medicines called direct antiviral agents (DAA) are much safer and more effective than older treatments, and have fewer side effects.

Prevention and control: Reducing risk of exposure to HCV is the best means of prevention as there is no vaccine for the virus.

For more information: [WHO hepatitis C fact sheet](#)