

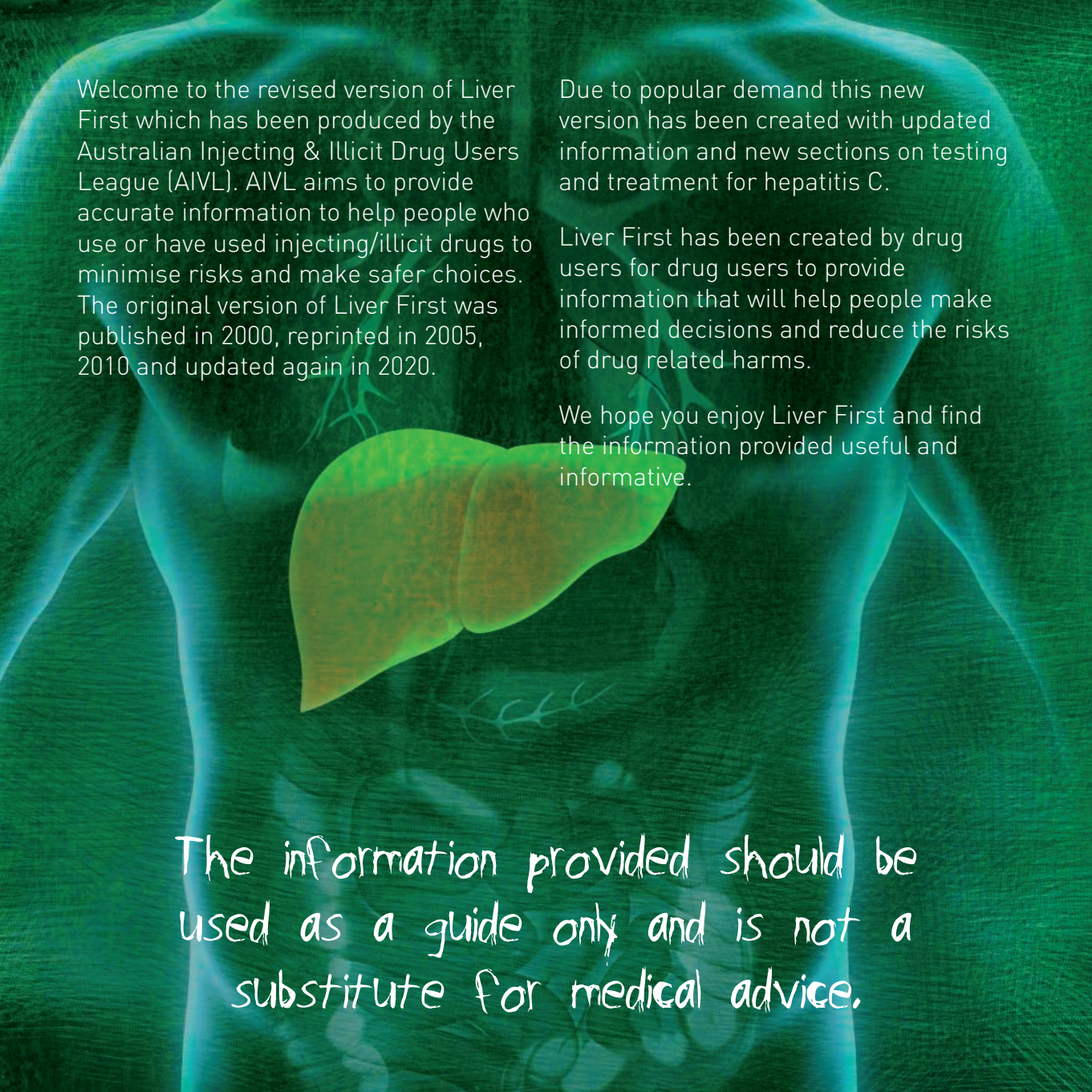


**AIVL**

Australian Injecting  
& Illicit Drug Users League

Liver  
first





Welcome to the revised version of Liver First which has been produced by the Australian Injecting & Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL). AIVL aims to provide accurate information to help people who use or have used injecting/illicit drugs to minimise risks and make safer choices. The original version of Liver First was published in 2000, reprinted in 2005, 2010 and updated again in 2020.

Due to popular demand this new version has been created with updated information and new sections on testing and treatment for hepatitis C.

Liver First has been created by drug users for drug users to provide information that will help people make informed decisions and reduce the risks of drug related harms.

We hope you enjoy Liver First and find the information provided useful and informative.

The information provided should be used as a guide only and is not a substitute for medical advice.



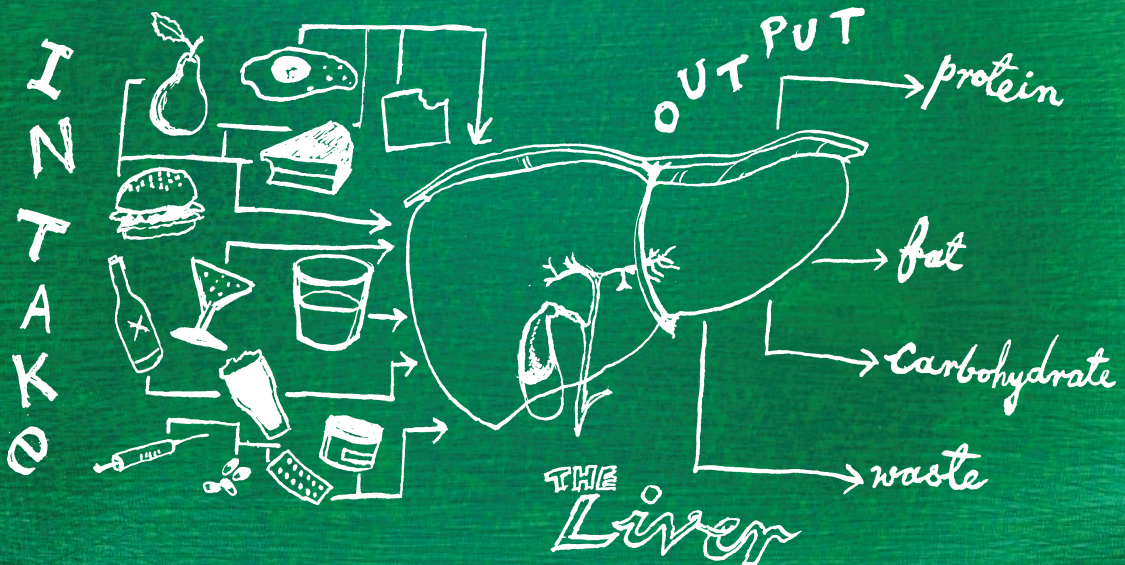
# The Liver

The liver is a large organ on the right hand side of the body protected by the lower ribs. It has many different and important tasks that play an essential role in good health.

Just a few of these are:

- Processing digested food and converting this into energy
- Storing iron, vitamins and other essential nutrients
- Controlling levels of fat and sugar in the blood
- Destroying toxic substances such as alcohol and other drugs
- Fighting infection in the body

Hepatitis C can reduce your liver's ability to do its job.



# Hepatitis C and The Liver

Hepatitis C (Hep C) is a blood borne virus that affects the liver, causing inflammation of liver cells. Some people experience no obvious effects from Hep C, whilst others will develop some degree of scarring of their liver. This scarring can range from mild scarring, called fibrosis, through to severe scarring, called cirrhosis. Because Hep C is a slow-acting virus it may be 20 to 30 years before liver function is greatly impaired. For the majority of people infection will not result in serious disease or death, especially if you do things to look after your liver, such as maintaining a healthy lifestyle and/or accessing the new treatments that are now available.

## Strains or Genotypes of Hepatitis C

There are a number of different strains, called genotypes, of the hepatitis C virus. A person with one strain of Hep C can be infected with other strains. This means that you may catch a different strain of Hep C each time you have contact with another person's infected blood. Having more than one strain can complicate treatment.



## Staying Healthy and Looking After Your Liver

If you have hepatitis C there are things you can do to stay healthy and lower the risk of more serious liver disease. Regular exercise, reducing alcohol and maintaining a healthy diet that is low in fat, sugar and salt will help not only your liver but also your overall health. Regular monitoring of your liver health is very important - this can be done by your doctor through blood tests and scans. A type of scan that is becoming more common is a Fibroscan® and is performed in a similar way as an ultrasound. This is where an external instrument is placed on your skin to scan over the area of your liver.

Looking after your liver also involves protecting yourself from other strains of Hep C and other blood borne viruses such as Hep B and HIV. To do this always follow safer injecting practices such as never sharing any injecting equipment. If you are coinfectd (infected

with more than one virus) this can speed up the progress of Hep C and increase the risk of developing liver disease or cancer. You can protect yourself from Hep B by being vaccinated against it - ask your doctor for more information.



# Symptoms of Hepatitis C

How hepatitis C affects you and the symptoms you experience can vary a great deal from person to person. How your body is affected by Hep C depends on a variety of factors, such as - how long you have had Hep C; how much of the virus you have in your system (viral load); whether you are co-infected with another virus (Hep B, HIV); and your general health.

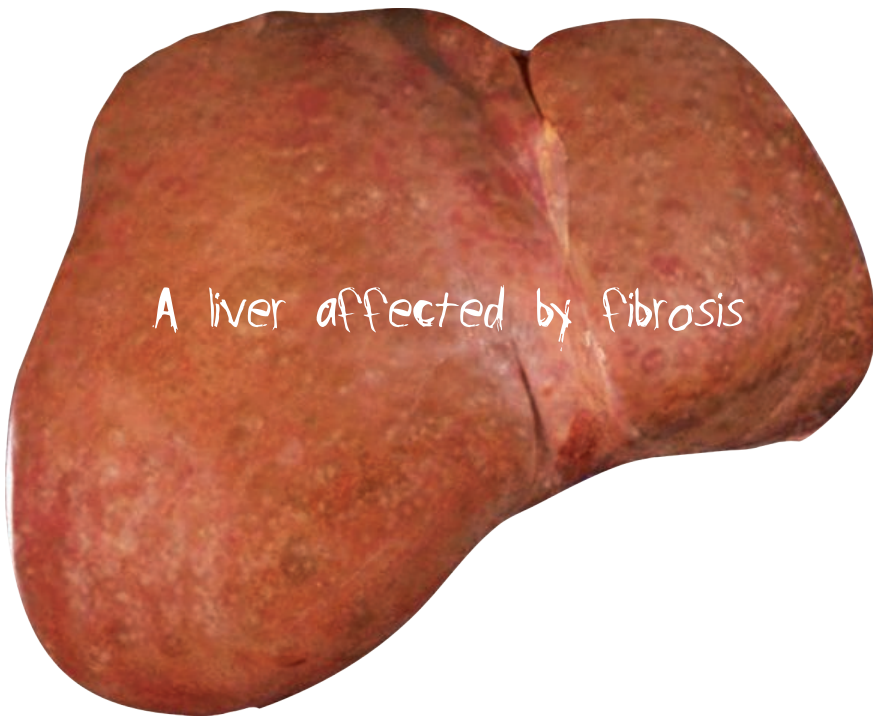
When you are first infected you probably won't even know as there are usually no symptoms.

Many people do not notice any symptoms for 10, 20 or even 30 years. The first signs of liver damage are often tiredness and generally feeling unwell. Sometimes there are no symptoms until the liver is seriously damaged. However it is important to note that your liver can be damaged even if you are not experiencing any symptoms.



## A Healthy Liver





A liver affected by fibrosis





Viral hepatitis (B or C) is the most common cause of cirrhosis.

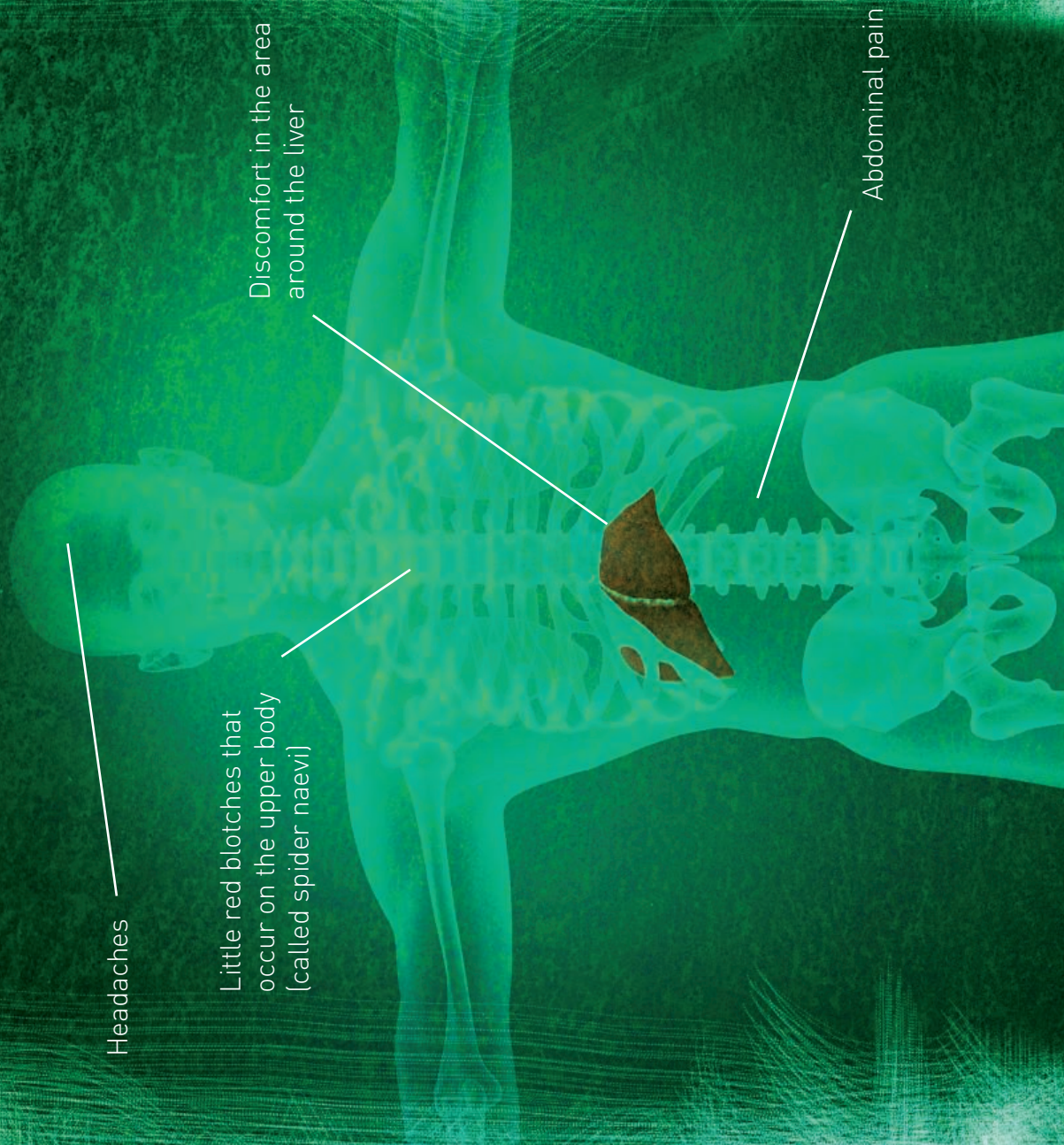
The good news is that after treatment there can be some reversal of cirrhosis and liver scarring so that symptoms of Hep C may reduce.



...and your liver can look more like this again.



# Common Symptoms of Hepatitis C



Headaches

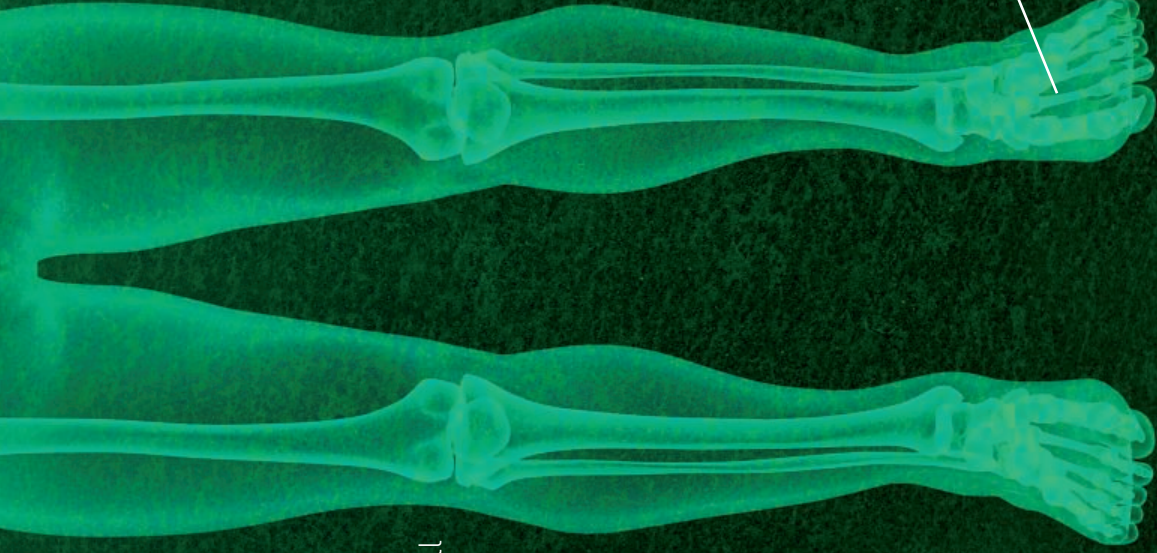
Little red blotches that occur on the upper body (called spider naevi)

Discomfort in the area around the liver

Abdominal pain



- Tiredness and fatigue – an overall feeling of low energy levels
- Easy bruising
- Altered sleep patterns
- Vagueness
- Depression
- Nausea, vomiting and/or loss of appetite



Swollen ankles

This is only an outline of some possible symptoms. A combination of factors determines how the disease progresses and what symptoms may be experienced.



# Hepatitis C Transmission

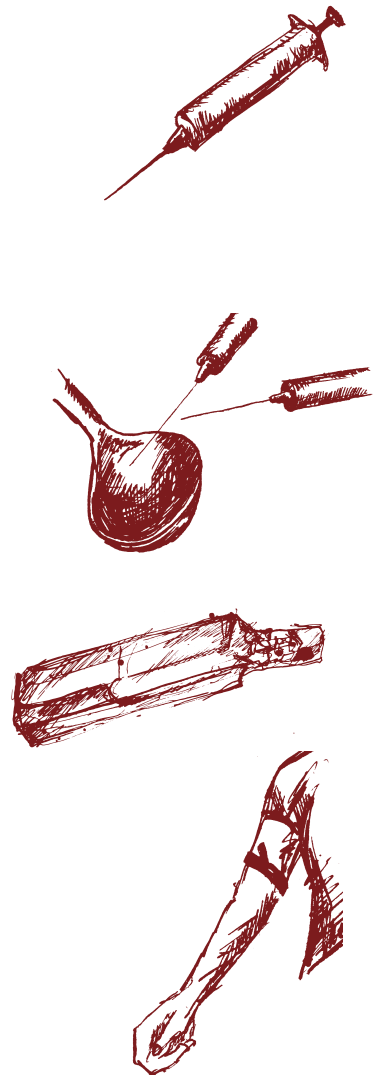
The Hepatitis C virus is transmitted when infected blood from another person enters your bloodstream. In Australia Hep C is most commonly spread when people share or re-use injecting equipment.

The Hep C virus can exist in amounts of blood that are too small to see and can be found on any equipment used for injecting, such as - syringes, spoons, filters, water or tourniquets. If someone helps you to inject they can have invisible amounts of blood on their hands and transfer this blood onto your injecting site.

The Hep C virus can be present in invisible amounts of blood



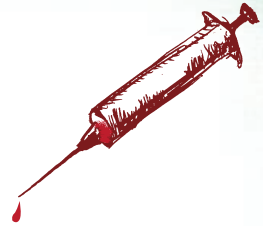
# Transmission



# Transmission - Injecting

## Re-using a syringe

Sharing someone else's syringe is very risky because blood can remain in the syringe. If you use someone else's syringe there is the risk of being infected with Hep C, Hep B or HIV. Cleaning with bleach can reduce, but will not necessarily kill, all these viruses. Use a new syringe every time you inject.



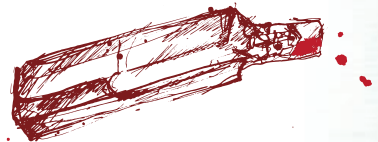
## Sharing a spoon

A used syringe in the spoon can leave the Hep C virus behind.



## Sharing Water

If a used syringe has been in the water, Hep C can be left behind and then drawn up into your shot.



## On a tourniquet

Hep C can be in blood on a tourniquet, get on your skin and then enter through your injection site.





# Transmission Risks

Hepatitis C is passed on when the blood of an infected person enters into the blood stream of another person. There are a number of ways this can happen. These transmission routes are listed below showing the level of risk involved.

## Method

## Transmission risk

Sharing injecting equipment	high risk
Unsterile medical or dental procedures	high risk
Unsterile tattooing or body piercing	high risk
Accidental needle stick injury	moderate/low risk
Mother to baby, before or during birth	moderate/low risk
Sharing razor-blades or toothbrushes	low risk
Blood transfusion in Australia before 1990	very low risk
Sexual activity	very low risk
Breastfeeding	very low risk

Hepatitis C is not considered a sexually transmitted infection except in people who are HIV positive which increases the risk of sexual transmission. There is a low risk of sexual transmission if there is blood present, for example during menstruation or rough sex. You cannot get or pass on Hep C through sharing household items such as cups, plates or cutlery, or through personal contact such as kissing or hugging.



# Hepatitis C Testing

## Antibody test

The first test that is usually done, through taking blood, is the hepatitis C antibody test. A Hep C antibody test measures to see if you have been exposed to the virus. The antibody test can't tell you if you still have the virus in your body. Another test (PCR) is needed to confirm whether or not you have Hep C infection. About 25% of people who are exposed to Hep C naturally clear the virus, but they will still have antibodies. Also people who have had successful treatment will still have antibodies. Having antibodies does not protect you or give you immunity from Hep C.

## PCR tests

After an antibody test, another test is needed to confirm if you have the virus. This is called a PCR test. It looks for the actual virus in the body rather than just antibodies to the virus. There are different PCR tests:

PCR viral detection test – looks for presence of the virus

PCR genotype test – tells what genotype (strain) you have

PCR viral load test – measures the amount of virus in your blood

If you are unsure about what Hep C tests you have had, it's important that you talk to your doctor. You may be one of the many people who have not had Hep C confirmed through a PCR test. This means you may believe you have Hep C when in fact you may only have the antibodies, but not the actual virus itself.



# Hepatitis C Treatment

There are new hepatitis C treatments available now in Australia.

These new treatments are much better than the previous treatments and for most people;

- They do not require injections, so are all-oral therapies (mostly either one or two pills per day)
- They have a much higher success rate for all strains or genotypes – over 90% in most instances.
- They have reduced the length of time for treatment; most people will have between 8 – 12 weeks of treatment
- They have very few side effects – especially compared to the older treatments

The treatment provided (length of treatment, medications used etc.) will be different for each person and based on your genotype, the level of liver scarring (people with cirrhosis will need longer treatment), whether you have had treatment in the past, the levels of virus in the blood, and co-infection with another virus etc. Through a series of tests these factors can be determined by your doctor who should be able to explain how they will influence your treatment.

Importantly – there are no restrictions on who can be treated for Hep C – it doesn't matter if you have mild or severe disease, how you got Hep C, or whether you still inject drugs. You are still able to access these new treatments.



# Hepatitis Organisations

## National

Hepatitis Australia  
PO Box 716  
Woden ACT 2606  
1800 437 222  
[www.hepatitisaustralia.com](http://www.hepatitisaustralia.com)

## Australian Capital Territory

Hepatitis ACT  
PO Box 6259  
O'Connor ACT 2602  
(02) 6230 6344  
[www.hepatitisact.com.au](http://www.hepatitisact.com.au)

## Northern Territory

NTAHC  
(AIVL Member Organisation)  
Northern Territory AIDS  
and Hepatitis Council  
46 Woods Street  
Darwin NT 0800  
(08) 8944 7777  
[www.ntahc.org.au](http://www.ntahc.org.au)

## Western Australia

Hepatitis WA  
134 Aberdeen St,  
Northbridge WA 6003  
(08) 9227 9800  
Helpline (Metro):  
(08) 9328 8538  
Helpline (Country):  
1800 800 070  
[www.hepatitiswa.com.au](http://www.hepatitiswa.com.au)

## Queensland

Hepatitis QLD  
Suite 3/100 Campbell Street,  
Bowen Hills, QLD 4006  
(07) 3846 0020  
1800 437 222  
(1800 HEP ABC)  
[www.hepqld.asn.au](http://www.hepqld.asn.au)

## New South Wales

Hepatitis NSW  
Level 4/ 414 Elizabeth St,  
Surry Hills, NSW 2010  
(02) 9332 1853  
Info Line: 1800 803 990  
[www.hep.org.au](http://www.hep.org.au)

## South Australia

Hepatitis SA  
(AIVL Member Organisation)  
3 Hackney Rd, Hackney,  
SA 5069  
(08) 8362 8443  
Info Line: 1800 437 222  
[www.hepsa.asn.au](http://www.hepsa.asn.au)

## Tasmania

TasCAHRD Inc  
Tasmanian AIDS, Hepatitis  
& Related Diseases  
319 Liverpool St, Hobart,  
TAS 7000  
(03) 6234 1242  
Info Line: 1800 437 222  
[www.redthread.org.au](http://www.redthread.org.au)

## Victoria

Hepatitis Vic  
Suite 5, 200 Sydney Rd,  
Brunswick, VIC 3056  
(03) 9380 4644  
Info Line: 1800 703 003  
[www.hepvic.org.au](http://www.hepvic.org.au)



# Other AIVL Member Organisations

## National

AIVL  
Australian Injecting and Illicit  
Drug Users League

Unit 26, 85 Northbourne  
Avenue, Turner, ACT 2612

GPO Box 1552,  
Canberra ACT 2601

(02) 6279 1600

[www.aivl.org.au](http://www.aivl.org.au)

## Australian Capital Territory

CAHMA and The Connection  
Canberra Alliance for Harm  
Minimisation and Advocacy

Level 1, Belconnen Churches  
Centre, Cnr Cohen St &  
Benjamin Way, ACT 2617

(02) 6253 3643

[www.cahma.org.au](http://www.cahma.org.au)

## Victoria

HRVic  
Harm Reduction Victoria

128 Peel St, North Melbourne,  
VIC 3051

(03) 9329 1500

[www.hrvic.org.au](http://www.hrvic.org.au)

## New South Wales

NUAA  
NSW Users and AIDS  
Association

Level 5, 414 Elizabeth St, Surry  
Hills NSW 2010

(02) 8354 7300

Free call: 1800 644 413

## NSP

345 Crown St, Surry Hills NSW

(02) 8354 7343

[www.nuaa.org.au](http://www.nuaa.org.au)

## Tasmania

TUHSL  
Tasmanian Users Health  
Support League

[tuhsltaste@gmail.com](mailto:tuhsltaste@gmail.com)

## Western Australia

Peer Based Harm  
Reduction WA

Perth  
Perth Suite 21-22, 7 Aberdeen  
St, Perth WA 6000

(08) 9325 8387

## Bunbury

97 Spencer St, Bunbury WA 6230

(08) 9791 6699

[www.harmreductionwa.org](http://www.harmreductionwa.org)

## Queensland

QUIHN  
QLD Injectors Health Network

## Brisbane

1 Hamilton Place, Bowen Hills,  
QLD 4006

(07) 3620 8111

Free call: 1800 172 076

## Gold Coast

Shop 12/89-99, West Burleigh  
Rd, Burleigh Heads, QLD 4220

(07) 5520 7900

Free call: 1800 172 076

## Cairns

60 Pease St, Manooora,  
QLD 4870

(07) 4032 1463

Free call: 1800 172 076

## Townsville

47 Thuringowa Drive, Kirwan,  
QLD 4817

(07) 4735 8828

Free call: 1800 172 076

[www.quihn.org](http://www.quihn.org)

## QuIVAA

QLD Injectors Voice for  
Advocacy and Action

1 Hamilton Place, Bowen Hills,  
QLD 4006

(07) 3620 8111

[www.qnada.org.au](http://www.qnada.org.au)