

News story: Around 80% of people don't realise hepatitis C can lead to cancer

Public Health England (PHE) is urging people to get free testing for hepatitis C virus (HCV) after new data shows a lack of awareness of the disease and the factors that can put people at risk of infection.

A study commissioned by The Hepatitis C Trust showed 80% of people were aware of HCV, however, less than 40% knew it infects the liver, and less than 30% knew the virus is curable.

Revolutionary treatments can now cure HCV in the vast majority of cases.

Around 200,000 people in the UK are thought to be living with chronic HCV, yet challenges in awareness remain a barrier to timely diagnosis and treatment.

HCV can cause severe liver damage and can lead to death if left untreated. It is spread through blood-to-blood contact.

It often doesn't have any specific symptoms until significant liver damage is caused. Some people with HCV may experience flu-like symptoms, tiredness and abdominal pain, which can easily be ignored or mistaken for other conditions.

In England, around one-third of those with a long-term infection with HCV are believed to be over the age of 50 and many will have acquired the infection years, or even decades, earlier.

As World Hepatitis Day approaches, PHE is partnering with The Hepatitis C Trust to increase efforts to ensure people living with HCV unknowingly are diagnosed and treated. This will contribute to achieving the World Health Organization's ambition of eliminating hepatitis C as a major public health threat by 2030 at the latest.

Dr Helen Harris, Clinical Scientist, Public Health England, said:

The results of this survey highlight the very low levels of awareness of hepatitis C and the factors that can put people at risk of infection. We strongly encourage anyone who may have been at risk of hepatitis C infection to get tested, whether or not they have any symptoms.

It is crucial that people are tested and diagnosed in order that they can access treatment early to clear the virus. Increased levels of testing and diagnosis are essential if we are to reach our goal of eliminating hepatitis C as a major public health threat in the UK by 2030, at the latest.

You should get tested if you:

- received a blood transfusion before September 1991, or a blood product before 1986 in the UK
- shared needles or other equipment to inject drugs, even if it was just once or many years ago
- had medical or dental treatment abroad in unsterile conditions
- had a tattoo, piercing, acupuncture, electrolysis, or semi-permanent make up using equipment that may have been unsterilised
- had unprotected sex with someone who has or might have hepatitis C
- shared a razor or toothbrush with someone who has, or might have hepatitis C

PHE strongly encourages anyone who may have been at risk of HCV to get tested, whether or not they have any symptoms. Free and simple testing is available from local GPs, sexual health clinics, genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics or drug treatment services.