

News story: Public Health England encourages hepatitis C testing

Around 200,000 people in the UK are thought to be living with chronic hepatitis C (hep C) infection, with a substantial proportion unaware they have it. Many will be over the age of 50 and may have no or few specific symptoms. Revolutionary treatments can now cure the virus in the vast majority of cases, with best results achieved in the earlier stages of the disease.

Those infected previously faced weeks of injections, with some experiencing severe side effects and struggling to complete their treatment. Now, tablets can clear the virus quicker and more effectively, with fewer side effects. This is thought to have contributed to the recent fall in deaths from severe hep C related liver disease.

The virus, which can cause severe liver damage and cancer, is thought to affect around 200,000 people in the UK, with many unaware they are infected. In England, around one-third of those with long-term infection are believed to be over the age of 50 and many will have acquired the infection years, or even decades, earlier.

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, hep C
- shared a razor or toothbrush with someone who has, or might have, hep C

Despite its debilitating effect on the liver, many with hep C may have no specific symptoms, with some – including tiredness and abdominal pain – easily ignored or mistaken for other conditions.

Free and simple testing is available from local GPs, sexual health clinics, genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics or drug treatment services.

The call for testing comes as Public Health England (PHE) publishes its most recent [Hepatitis C in the UK report](#). The report, released today (28 July 2017), highlights the need to find and treat those infected with hep C in order to sustain the recent fall in deaths from the condition.

Dr Helen Harris, Clinical Scientist in PHE's Immunisation, Hepatitis and Blood Safety Department said:

We strongly encourage anyone who may have been at risk of hep C infection to get tested, whether or not they have any symptoms. The sooner treatment starts, the greater the chance of avoiding long-term health complications. If people are unsure, they should visit their GP or take our quick online quiz to find out whether they might have been exposed to the hep C virus and would benefit from a test.

We are hopeful that the increased access to improved treatments over recent years has contributed to the latest fall in deaths from severe hep C related liver disease. This, combined with interventions to prevent infection in the first place, can help us to achieve our vision of eliminating hep C as a major public health threat in the UK.

PHE is backing World Hepatitis Day's global #ShowYourFace campaign, which aims to increase awareness of the disease. The campaign encourages personalised photos via social media to emphasise that viral hepatitis can affect anyone.