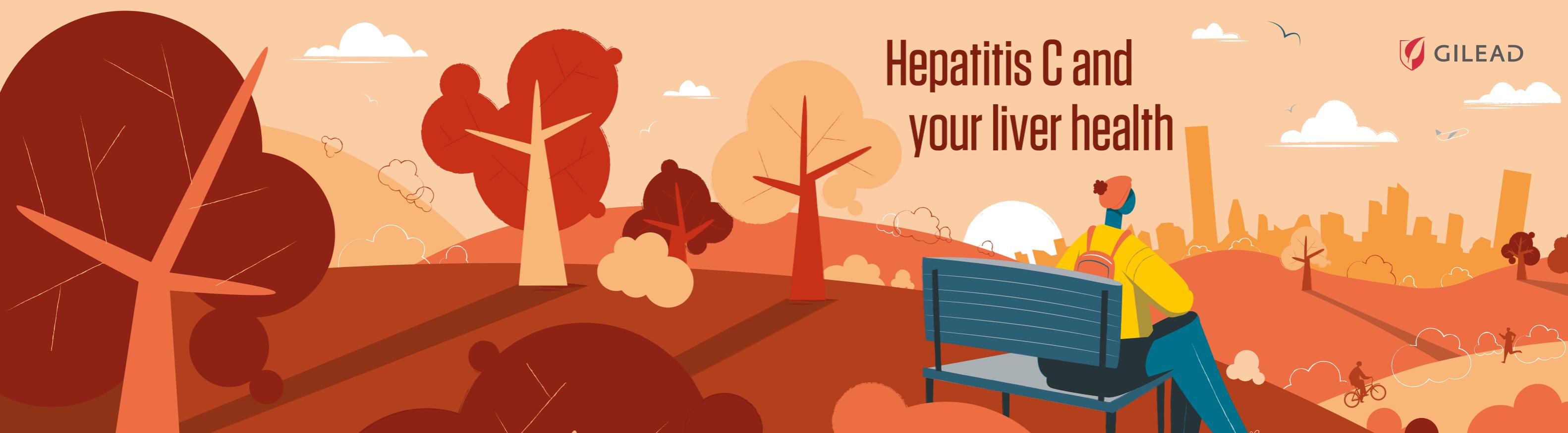




# Hepatitis C and your liver health



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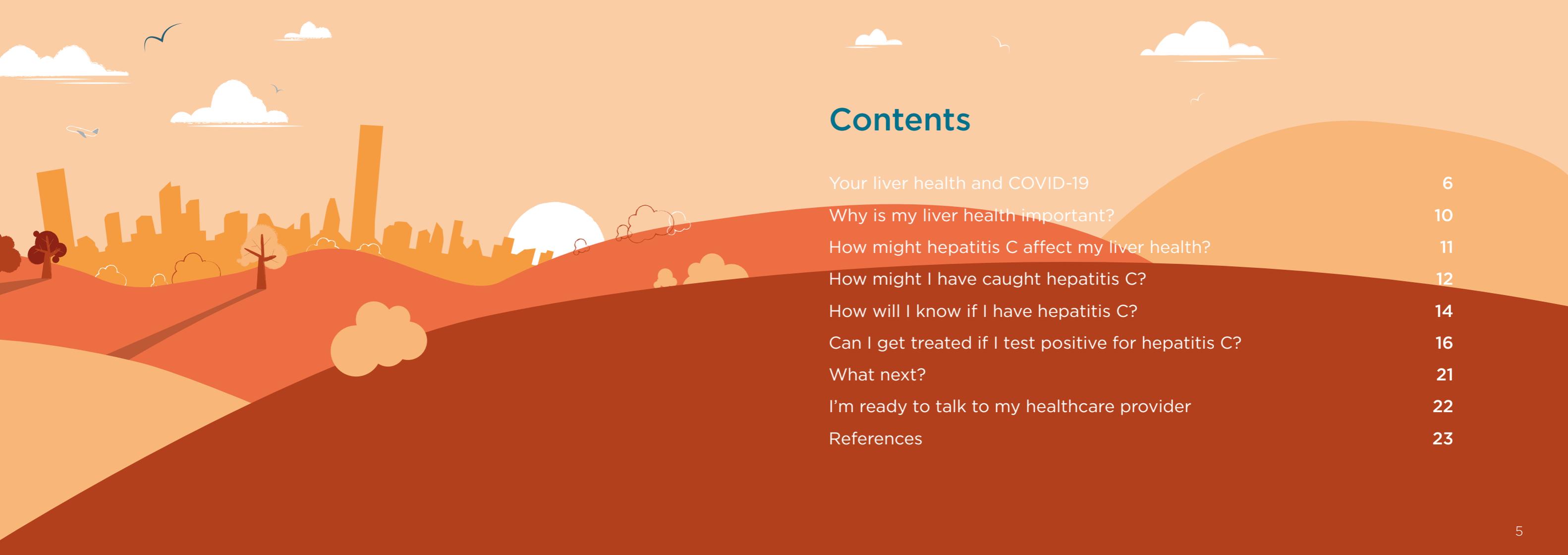
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# Your liver health and COVID-19

**What are coronaviruses and COVID-19?**



Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can cause illnesses like the common cold. COVID-19 is the disease caused by a type of coronavirus that was discovered recently.

**Am I at risk of viral hepatitis?**  
**When was the last time I had a test?**  
**Have I been in contact with infected blood?**  
**What about drug use?**

If you have a condition that affects your liver, like viral hepatitis C, you might be wondering about the impact of COVID-19.

If you have had viral hepatitis before, or think you might have hepatitis now, it is important to get tested. You should take care of yourself and get as healthy as you can. This includes looking after your liver health.



**What can I do to be safe?**

As well as talking to your healthcare provider for detailed advice, there are some simple things you can do to help protect yourself and others from the spread of coronaviruses.

COVID-19 lives on the surfaces we touch and the virus can spread if we touch our face. Break the chain of infection by keeping your hands clean and away from your face.



# Your liver health and COVID-19

1

Keep things clean and disinfect things that you touch often to help reduce the risk of passing the infection on to other people.

2

Wash your hands – use soap and water to thoroughly wash your hands regularly. Use alcohol gel if soap and water isn't available.

3

COVID-19 can spread through the eyes, nose and mouth, so avoid touching your face.

4

Catch coughs and sneezes in a tissue then dispose of it straight away before washing your hands.

5

Keep your distance from other people – two meters is advised. Avoid crowded places and public transport whenever you can.



**If you think you have COVID-19 symptoms, you should seek medical advice. If you have any breathing problems, call 999 for medical care straight away.**

Talk to your healthcare provider for detailed advice about what else you can do to practice safer drug use for yourself and the people around you. Check the NHS website for the most up to date information on COVID-19 <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

You can also check <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus> for the most up to date guidance from the government



**I use illicit drugs.  
What can I do to stay safe?**

People using street drugs (like heroin, opiates, benzos, cocaine and crack) may misinterpret the symptoms of COVID-19 as withdrawal symptoms. Be open and honest with your healthcare provider for the best information and if you have difficulty breathing, call 999.



# Why is my liver health important?



## A healthy liver, a healthy you

The liver is one of the largest organs in the human body. The liver helps your body to 'clean' your blood, removing waste from what you eat and drink. It also helps you process food and absorb nutrients, so keeping your liver healthy is essential to your overall wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

## Looking after your liver

A healthy liver can help you feel your best.

### Here are some things that may harm your liver:

- ! Drinking a lot of alcohol<sup>2</sup>
- ! Using drugs recreationally<sup>3</sup>
- ! Eating an unhealthy diet, or being overweight<sup>2</sup>
- ! All forms of viral hepatitis, including the common forms hepatitis A, B, C<sup>2</sup>



Hepatitis is the term used to describe inflammation of the liver. Most people recover from hepatitis A with no lasting liver damage, but hepatitis B and C can cause long term liver disease and liver cancer.<sup>2</sup>

# How might hepatitis C affect my liver health?

## Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is a virus that attacks the liver.<sup>4</sup>

The hepatitis C virus lives in infected blood and is spread when someone comes into contact with blood from an infected person.<sup>4,5</sup>

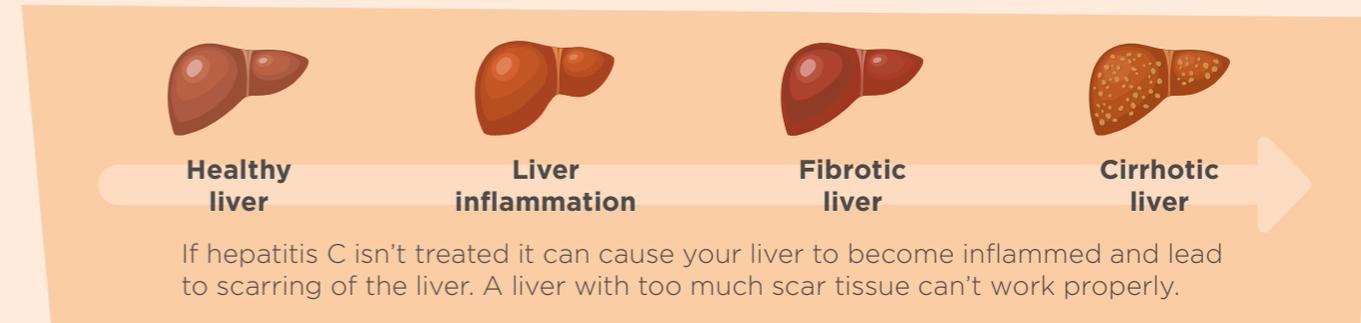
BUT, you might not realise you have hepatitis C straight away because there are no symptoms for most people at the beginning - the virus can take a long time to affect the liver and cause symptoms.<sup>12</sup>

The only way to know for certain if these symptoms are caused by hepatitis C is to get tested.

## Hepatitis C can harm your liver

Hepatitis C can damage your liver and make you feel unwell in the long term. People report stomach problems, muscle aches and a foggy head or fever. These symptoms are very general and can feel like flu or IBS, so they can go unnoticed or misdiagnosed for many years.

If you have had hep C for 20 years, these are the stages your liver could undergo.



# How might I have caught hepatitis C?

## Think carefully— you could have hepatitis C if you have ever:

- **Injected drugs<sup>5</sup>**
- **Had a blood transfusion abroad, or in the UK before 1991<sup>5</sup>**
- **Had a tattoo or piercing with an unsterilised needle<sup>5</sup>**
- **Had unprotected or rough sex with someone who has hepatitis C, including MSM community<sup>5</sup>**
- **Been exposed to any unsterilised medical or dental equipment abroad<sup>5</sup>**

If your mother had hepatitis C when you were born, there is a very small chance it could have been passed to you.<sup>5</sup>

## Don't pick it up, don't pass it on

Successfully treating hepatitis C means that you cannot pass it on to other people anymore.<sup>6</sup> But even after you have been treated, you can catch hepatitis C again.<sup>6</sup> To reduce the risk of catching hepatitis C or passing it on, avoid:

- **Sharing needles, syringes and other items used to take drugs<sup>5</sup>**
- **Having unprotected sex especially with men who have sex with men<sup>5</sup>**
- **Sharing your razor or toothbrush<sup>5</sup>**

# How will I know if I have hepatitis C?

## Get tested

**If you have had hepatitis C before, or think you might have contracted it, it is important to get tested.**

Testing can be done in many different places such as GP surgeries, hospitals, sexual health clinics, drug and alcohol services, pharmacies or at home (using a self test). There are also mobile testing services if that is easier for you.<sup>10</sup>

Hepatitis C is usually diagnosed using 2 tests which can be done in the same testing visit. These tests are called the antibody test and the PCR test.<sup>13</sup>

## The antibody test

You need an antibody test to find out if you have ever had to fight off a hep C infection before. A positive test means you've come into contact with hepatitis C. You'll then need another test (a PCR test) to find out if the hepatitis virus is active.<sup>13</sup>

## The PCR test

The PCR test checks if the virus is still active in your body. The test results come back within a few weeks.

Your support provider can talk to you and take you through everything you need to know.

# Can I get treated if I test positive for hepatitis C?

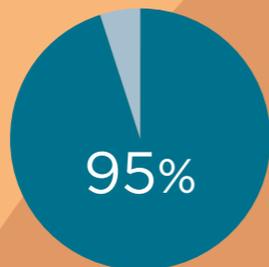


- Up to 12 weeks of treatment<sup>8</sup>
- Treatment is given as a pill-based medication<sup>8</sup>
- Most treatment has few side effects<sup>8</sup>

## Hepatitis C can be treated!

**Good news:** these days, most people with hep C **can be treated.**

Treatment can be taken over 8–12 weeks with medicine taken as a pill.<sup>6,8</sup>



**95% of patients with hepatitis C are cured<sup>11</sup>**



Your healthcare provider will talk to you about what treatments are suitable for you. It is important to tell them about anything else you are taking (including medicines, herbal remedies or street drugs).<sup>2</sup>

## Getting treatment is simple

No injections are needed. Treatment generally involves taking tablets for up to 12 weeks.<sup>8</sup>

You will normally have a blood test twice during treatment to check it is working, with a follow up three months after treatment to make sure you are clear.<sup>8</sup>

You may experience some side effects from your treatment. Different people experience different side effects, but you may feel a little sick and have trouble sleeping to begin with.<sup>8</sup> This is normal and should settle down quickly.<sup>8</sup>

Your healthcare team will tell you what to expect, and can suggest ways to ease any discomfort. If you notice any side effects at all, let your healthcare provider know straight away.

## There are things you can do to help you feel better during treatment:

- Eat as well as you can<sup>9</sup>
- Exercise regularly<sup>9</sup>
- Avoid or drink less alcohol<sup>9</sup>
- Smoke less, or quit if you can<sup>9</sup>

Your healthcare team can offer you support and advice with all of this — from eating right and getting active, through to helping you quit smoking or drinking. Don't be afraid to ask.

If you are going to take drugs or drink alcohol during your treatment, speak to your healthcare provider.

Three months after you have finished your treatment, your healthcare provider will ask you to take another blood test to confirm that you have cleared the virus.<sup>8</sup>

Research in groups of people who inject drugs has shown that treatment of hep C can have a positive effect on things like:

- Self-esteem
- Mental health
- Tiredness and energy levels
- Getting a new job<sup>14</sup>

## Get tested, get treated, get cured

Hepatitis C is a virus that can infect the liver. If left untreated, it can sometimes cause serious and potentially life-threatening damage to the liver over many years.<sup>6</sup> Avoid passing hepatitis C onto others.<sup>6</sup>

## What next?

Take care: you can catch hepatitis C again.

Completing treatment is a great step towards having a healthier liver and a happier life.

But remember, if you take part in risky behaviour you can become infected again.

See the 'Don't pick it up, don't pass it on' section on page 11 for tips to avoid contracting hepatitis C again.



### Further support, if you need it

If you would like any support or you have any queries or questions you can contact The Hepatitis C Trust confidentially:  
020 7089 6221 [helpline@hepctrust.org.uk](mailto:helpline@hepctrust.org.uk)

# I'm ready to talk to my healthcare provider

Your healthcare team is here to help you. Speaking openly with them regularly with any questions or concerns means they can help you in the best way possible.

## If you think you could have hep C these questions will help you get the most from a chat with your healthcare team

- How do I know if I have hepatitis C?
- Where and how can I get tested?
- Where do I go for advice?
- If I have the virus, how do I make sure I don't pass it onto others?
- How could my other health conditions affect my hepatitis C treatment?

## When getting tested

- What do my test results mean?
- How long will it take to get the results?
- What do I need to do now?
- Where can I learn more about hepatitis C?

## If you are diagnosed with hepatitis C

- What does this mean for me?
- What can I do to get better and improve my liver health?
- When do I need to start treatment?
- How could my other health conditions affect my hepatitis C treatment?
- Where can I get support and advice on dealing with my hepatitis C diagnosis?

## When starting treatment

- How do I take the treatment?
- What should I be aware of during treatment?
- How often do I need to see my healthcare team, and will they arrange the appointments for me?

## After treatment

- How can I avoid getting hepatitis C again?
- What support services are available to me and how do I get in touch with them?

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