

Hep C factsheet: Antibody testing



For more information about anything in this factsheet, phone the *Hepatitis Infoline* on 1800 803 990 or go to www.hep.org.au

What are antibodies?

Antibodies are part of our bodies defence system. They are formed in response to anything foreign that gets into our bloodstream – such as viruses, bacteria, or vaccines.

What do antibodies do?

Antibodies “stick on” to anything foreign that they find. If a virus tries to enter a body cell but has big globs of antibody hanging off it, the virus can be blocked from entering the cell.

As well as sticking to viruses, some antibodies trigger inflammation around a cell, which can stop bacteria and viruses growing.

How do hep C antibody tests work?

Hep C antibody tests are used to see if a person has ever developed hep C antibodies. If your test comes back positive, it means that hep C antibodies were found. This means that you have had hep C at some time. But this test doesn't tell you if you have hep C right now.

If you ever had hep C, you will get a positive antibody test, even if you no longer have hep C now. Some people can clear hep C without treatment. 1 in 4 people will clear hep C in the first 6 months of having it. Some people may have had their hep C cured but will still have hep C antibodies.

To find out if you have hep C **now**, you need to then get a PCR test. This test will tell your doctor if you have a current hep C infection.

What is the “window period” for antibody tests?

A ‘window period’ is the amount of time it takes between being exposed to hep C and being able to be tested. It takes 12 weeks after being exposed to hep C to get an accurate result.

A hep C diagnosis can be confirmed much earlier than 12 weeks by using PCR tests, which take two weeks for an accurate test result.

For babies, the window periods are: eight weeks with PCR, and 18 months with antibody tests.

What other blood tests are used?

You might be offered some of these other tests below:

Liver function test

These blood test will show if there is damage to the liver cells and how well your liver is working.

Fibroscans

This is a simple, quick and pain-free way to check for any liver damage. A Fibroscan is like an ultrasound. It can tell your doctor if there is any fibrosis or cirrhosis. The scan only takes 5-10 minutes and doesn't involve any needles.

APRI blood tests

Most doctors in rural or remote areas of NSW are unable to access Fibroscan machines. If you live in these regions, your hep C treatment assessment will most likely use APRI. APRI uses results from blood tests to calculate whether you might have fibrosis.

PCR blood tests

PCR tests are used to see whether you have a current hep C infection. PCR tests can also measure the level of hep C virus in the blood and which genotype you have – which can be helpful for treatment.

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This factsheet was developed by Hepatitis NSW. It was reviewed by the Hepatitis NSW Medical and Research Advisory Panel.

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