Remember, you may have no obvious symptoms. In some cases, it may take up to six months before the infection becomes detectable, so it may be necessary to take a second test.

These treatments can be complex and may have side-effects. If a person is diagnosed with Hepatitis C treatment options would be discussed with them where appropriate.

Are there any treatments?

Some people with Hepatitis C will remain well and need no special treatment. There are some treatments for those with moderate or severe liver disease but these are not suitable for all people and are not effective in all cases.

There is currently no vaccine to protect against Hepatitis C

If you would like further information on Hepatitis C, please contact:

The British Liver Trust - website http://www.britishlivertrust.org.uk
The local Community Drugs Team
The Community Infection Control Nurse at your local Primary Care Trust (PCT)
your local Health Protection Unit
your local GUM / Sexual Health Clinic
or
http://www.hpa.org.uk/topics
What is Hepatitis C

Hepatitis is inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis C is a virus that can cause an infection of the liver. Symptoms include:

• Nausea and vomiting
• Loss of appetite
• Abdominal pain
• Aching joints and tiredness
• Fever
• Jaundice - yellowing of skin and the whites of the eyes, dark urine and pale coloured stools/motions.

Many people will have no symptoms at all, or will feel only mildly unwell, and some may have the infection for 20 or more years before they have any obvious symptoms. Around 20% of people (1 in 5) who are infected with the virus will clear it completely from their bodies. Those who do not clear the virus will become carriers, and some carriers may develop serious long-term liver problems such as cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver, or occasionally liver cancer.

Who can it affect?

The people who are most likely to be affected by Hepatitis C include:

• People who inject (or have ever injected drugs) and have shared injecting equipment including needles, syringes, filters, spoons or water.
• People who have had a blood transfusion, or received blood products before 1991.
• People who have had medical or dental treatment in a country with higher levels of hepatitis C infection than the UK (e.g. South East Asia).
• People who change their sexual partners frequently and have unprotected sex.
• Renal dialysis patients.
• People who have tattoos or have body piercings
• Healthcare workers from accidental sharps/inoculation injuries

How is Hepatitis C caught?

• Hepatitis C is passed from an infected person through the transfer of body fluids such as blood, or other body fluids (e.g. semen or vaginal secretions).
• From sharing needles and other injecting equipment, razors, toothbrushes, or any other article that may be contaminated with blood.
• Occasionally a pregnant woman may pass on Hepatitis C to her child.
• From unclean/contaminated needles and equipment when a person has a tattoo or a body piercing.
• Hepatitis C cannot pass through intact skin.

How do you prevent Hepatitis C?

• Do not share injecting equipment, toothbrushes or razors.
• Practice safer sex (using a condom), especially if you change partners regularly.
• Always go to a reputable place for tattooing, body piercing, and electrolysis, and ask for a new and unused needle.
• When travelling abroad, try to avoid any procedure that punctures the skin, such as acupuncture, body piercing, or tattooing. (Hygiene regulations may not be as strict as in the UK).
• If you require regular injections (e.g. if you are diabetic) and are travelling abroad, then ensure that you take enough sterile needles and syringes with you - along with an authorisation from your doctor.
• Make sure you cover all cuts and grazes with waterproof plasters, especially on your hands.

What should I do if I think I am at risk?

See your GP or practice nurse, or if appropriate, the GUM / Sexual Health clinic or Community Drug Team, especially if you inject, or have ever injected drugs and have shared injecting equipment. There are now blood tests that can diagnose Hepatitis C and you may wish to discuss whether it would be appropriate for you to have this test.