

## Dr Mark Aldersley



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# Hep C: curable but dangerous if undiagnosed

WHAT IS Hepatitis C and could you be at risk of having it?

Hepatitis C is a virus which is found in blood and mainly infects the liver causing inflammation and damage to this organ. There are 150 million people worldwide who are infected with the virus and in England it is thought that around 160,000 people are carrying the virus.

Public Health England estimates that 160,000 people in England are living with hepatitis C. This virus causes inflammation of the liver but because the liver can still carry out its jobs when damaged, many people are completely unaware they have the infection.

Around 20 per cent of people who are exposed to the virus will naturally clear the virus from their body in the first instance but this means that 80 per cent of people exposed remain chronically

infected unless they receive treatment. Over many years these people develop damage to their liver which can eventually cause severe scarring (cirrhosis) or primary liver cancer.

Who then is at risk of developing Hepatitis C? If you had an accident or operation

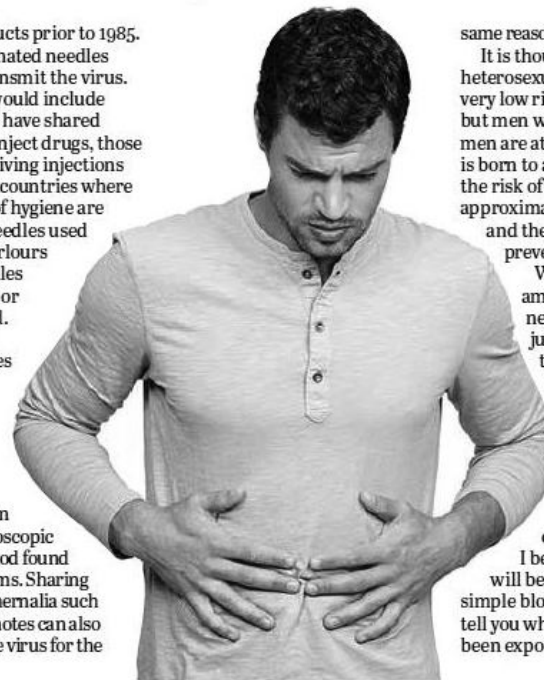
***“There is a new treatment, just involving taking tablets with minimal side-effects.”***

before 1991 which required a transfusion of blood you may have been exposed to infected blood. Since this time all blood in the UK has been screened for Hepatitis C. The Government make payments to these people who were infected from NHS blood transfusions prior to 1992 or

blood products prior to 1985.

Contaminated needles can also transmit the virus. Examples would include people who have shared needles to inject drugs, those people receiving injections in overseas countries where standards of hygiene are poor and needles used in tattoo parlours where needles are re-used or unsterilised.

Sharing toothbrushes or razors with an infected person carries a risk of transmission due to microscopic traces of blood found on these items. Sharing drug paraphernalia such as pipes or notes can also transmit the virus for the



same reason.

It is thought that heterosexual sex carries a very low risk of transmission but men who have sex with men are at risk. When a baby is born to an infected mother the risk of transmission is approximately five per cent and there is no vaccine to prevent this.

What can be done if I am infected? There is a new treatment which just involves taking tablets with minimal side-effects for 8-12 weeks and which carries a greater than 95 per cent chance of a complete cure.

If I am concerned how can I be tested? Your GP will be able to perform a simple blood test which will tell you whether you have been exposed to the virus and

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whether you are still infected or not. Further information is also available from the Hepatitis C Trust Helpline on 020 7089 6221 or www.hepctrust.org.uk.