

# Hepatitis C blood tests: antibodies & PCR



FACTSHEET 02

Hepatitis Council of Qld

“ The first test for hepatitis C is a blood test which checks for antibodies. The human body produces antibodies in response to different viruses

## What are antibodies?

- If you are exposed to the hepatitis C virus (i.e. through blood-to-blood contact) your body makes *antibodies* to try and fight the virus;
- About 25% of people who contract the virus will clear it naturally within the first 6 months, and it is gone for good (however you can get the virus again if you continue to engage in high-risk behaviours);
- The antibodies your body makes will stay in your blood forever, even though the virus is gone;
- Antibodies are completely harmless and cannot be transmitted to other people;
- It is important to remember that, unlike some antibodies your body makes for other viruses; **hepatitis C antibodies do not protect you from getting the virus in the future** if you are ever exposed to hepatitis C again.

Contact the Hepatitis Council of Queensland to find out how to avoid coming into contact with the hepatitis C virus.

## What is an antibody test?

An **antibody test** is a blood test that shows whether or not you have hepatitis C antibodies in your body. If you have an antibody test and the results came back **antibody positive**, this shows that you have hepatitis C antibodies. This means you either:

1. Currently have hepatitis C, or
2. Did have hepatitis C in the past but do not have it anymore.

## What is a PCR test?

A **PCR test** (also known as an RNA test) is a blood test that shows whether or not you actually have the hepatitis C virus in your body. If you get a PCR test, the results will come back either:

- **PCR negative** (meaning that you do not have the hepatitis C virus), or
- **PCR positive** (meaning that you have the virus).

“It all worked well for me. My GP referred me to a Gastroenterologist who has looked after me until now when it was considered appropriate that I be seen at a public liver clinic. My friend knew of the Hep Council”



*The ABC of Hepatitis Training Package is an initiative of Queensland Health through funding provided by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing under the National Hepatitis C Prevention and Education Initiative*

Updated: 3 April 2009

For more information [www.hepqld.asn.au](http://www.hepqld.asn.au)  
or Hepatitis Council of Qld info line 1800 648 491

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If your body is not able to clear the virus within the first 6 months of coming into contact with it, you are one of the 75% of people who go on to get *chronic* (long-term) hepatitis C. In this situation, if you were to get an antibody test and a PCR test, the results would come back **antibody positive** and **PCR positive**.

Unfortunately, there is sometimes confusion about these blood tests and people may think they have the hepatitis C virus when they only have hepatitis C antibodies. **Just because you have antibodies does not mean you have the virus**, i.e. you may have come into contact with the virus once before but your body got rid of the virus. In this situation, the antibody test and PCR test would come back **antibody positive** and **PCR negative**.

So, it is important to talk to your GP or liver specialist about any blood test results and understand the difference between an antibody test and a PCR test.

## Where can I go to get tested?

To get an antibody test you can contact your local GP, Sexual Health Clinic, Family Planning or Aboriginal Medical Service. PCR tests are available from a GP or liver clinic only if you have had a positive antibody test first. For details contact the Hepatitis Council of Queensland on 1800 648 491 or visit the site at [www.hepqld.asn.au](http://www.hepqld.asn.au)

## Interested in finding out more?

### Factsheets

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- 37 Hepatitis B: what you need to know

### Organisations

- Sexual Health Clinics (see [www.hepqld.asn.au](http://www.hepqld.asn.au) for clinic listings)
- Family Planning Queensland (see [www.hepqld.asn.au](http://www.hepqld.asn.au) for listings)
- Aboriginal Medical Services (for your nearest service see [www.hepqld.asn.au](http://www.hepqld.asn.au))

### Brochures

- Hepatitis C Information Kit (*Hepatitis Council of QLD*)
- Contact: Post-test Information for Hepatitis C (*Hepatitis Australia*)

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