NSW MULTICULTURAL HIV & HEPATITIS SERVICE

NSW GOVERNMENT

Hepatitis C –
The cure is here!

Your guide to liver wellness

NSW MULTICULTURAL
HIV & HEPATITIS SERVICE

The information in this booklet reflects the most current information available to the Multicultural HIV and Hepatitis Service at the time of publication.

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Introduction

This booklet is for anyone interested in finding out about hepatitis C. It explains what it means to have hepatitis C and ways to protect yourself from getting hepatitis C and passing it on to others. It also explains how to get tested for hepatitis C and how it is cured.

This booklet is for you, if you:

- Have had a blood transfusion, vaccination or surgery overseas and are not sure that the equipment used was completely clean (unsterile)
- Have had a traditional medical procedure overseas and are not sure that the equipment used was completely clean (unsterile)
- Are not sure if your tattoo or body piercing was done with clean equipment (sterile)
- Have been diagnosed with hepatitis C
- Have hepatitis B or HIV
- Have injected drugs or steroids or have shared injecting equipment
- Have been in prison.

Some questions this booklet answers

What is hepatitis C?

How can I get hepatitis C?

How can I protect myself from getting hepatitis C?

What does hepatitis C do to my body?

Should I get tested for hepatitis C?

Where can I get a hepatitis C test?

Is there a cure?

Who should I tell?

What are some services that can help me?

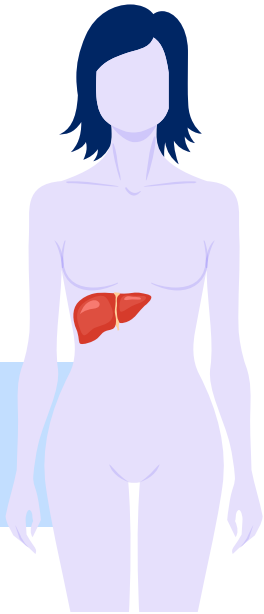
What is hepatitis C?

What you need to know about hepatitis and your liver

The word hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Alcohol, certain medicines, drugs or viruses can cause liver inflammation.

The liver is an important part of your body because it:

- Breaks down the food, drinks, and medicines you take
- Removes harmful toxins from your blood
- Helps fight infections and digest food.



It is important to take care of your liver to keep it healthy and working well. In Australia, the main viruses that cause hepatitis are A, B, and C. They are different, but they all affect the liver.

Hepatitis	Spread	Prevention	Treatment
A	Contaminated food and water	Vaccine and good hygiene	Body cures itself
B	Contact with infected blood, sexual activity and from mother to baby during birth.	Vaccine and use of condoms during sex	Treatment available
C	Contact with infected blood	No vaccine available See 'Preventing hepatitis C' section	Cure available

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the hepatitis C virus. It is passed on when the blood of someone with hepatitis C enters the body of another person.

It affects people of all ages, backgrounds, and cultures around the world. There are about 50 million people in the world living with chronic hepatitis C (World Health Organization, 2024).

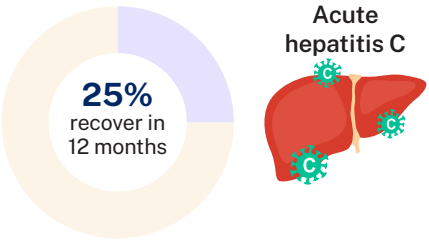
Many people who have hepatitis C don't know they have it.

It can take many years for the symptoms to show.

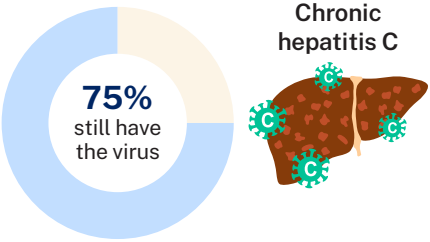
Without treatment hepatitis C can cause serious liver damage (cirrhosis) and liver cancer.

How does hepatitis C affect your liver?

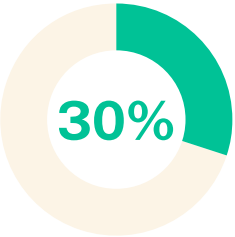
If you get hepatitis C, your body will try to fight the virus. Of the 100 people with hepatitis C, 25 will get rid of the virus within 12 months without having treatment. This is called **acute (short-term) hepatitis C**. You may feel sick for a short time but then you get better.



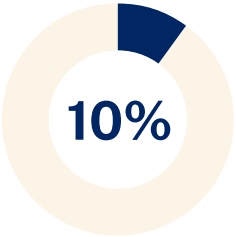
The other 75 people will still have the virus in their body but may have no obvious symptoms. This is called **chronic (long-term) hepatitis C**. Chronic hepatitis C infection happens when your body can no longer fight off the virus. This can lead to serious health issues. It often starts with liver scarring (fibrosis).



Without medical treatment:



will develop symptoms which will become noticeable between 10 to 15 years after becoming infected.



will have serious liver disease 20 years after becoming infected.

of these will develop liver failure or liver cancer and may die prematurely.

Fortunately, there is a cure for hepatitis C

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people with hepatitis C do not experience any symptoms for many years. For those that do, symptoms are like the flu. Some people may have nausea, extreme tiredness and pain or discomfort around the liver.

Hepatitis C symptoms include:

Nausea

Tiredness

Pain or discomfort

People with chronic hepatitis C may not feel sick until their liver becomes very damaged. This can take many years.

The only way to know if you have hepatitis C is through a blood test

How do you get hepatitis C?

You can get hepatitis C when the blood of a person with hepatitis C enters your blood stream. This includes a blood drop that is too small to see.

You can get hepatitis C from:

Unsterile medical, dental, cosmetic procedures, vaccinations or surgery done overseas (these are generally safe in Australia)

Unsterile traditional practices that involve blood, such as tattooing and skin piercing

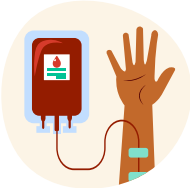
Using someone else's personal items that may have blood on them, such as razors and toothbrushes (even very small amounts)

Mother to child during pregnancy or childbirth if the mother has hepatitis C

Blood-to-blood contact during sex without a condom

Accidental needlestick injury

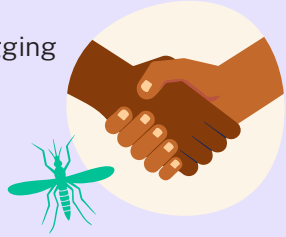
Sharing and reusing any equipment used for injecting drugs or steroids



Blood transfusions in Australia before 1990

You cannot get hepatitis C from:

- Coughing, sneezing, handshaking, kissing or hugging
- Sharing food, drinks, cooking, or eating items
- Sharing toilets
- Swimming pools
- Mosquitos or other insect bites.



Testing for hepatitis C

Getting a hepatitis C test

The only way to know if you have hepatitis C is to have a blood test.

A hepatitis C test is not part of your regular health check so you will need to ask your doctor specifically for a hepatitis C test. Testing is free with Medicare.

Getting a hepatitis C test is easy and confidential

Who should get tested?

If you were born or have lived in a country where hepatitis C is common, it is important you have a hepatitis C test.

It is also important to get tested for hepatitis C if:

You have been in prison

You have hepatitis B or HIV

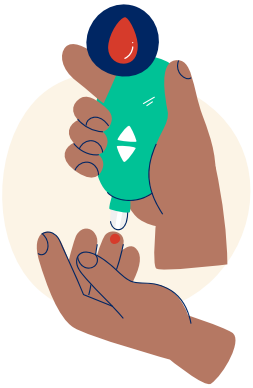
You moved to Australia from a country where hepatitis C is common

Types of hepatitis C tests

Test	How does it work?	What does it mean if it is negative?	What does it mean if it is positive?
Hepatitis C Antibody Test	This is a blood test to show if you have ever had hepatitis C.	If your result is negative, you have never had hepatitis C and you don't have it now.	If your result is positive, you have been exposed to hepatitis C some time in your life. You will need to have a PCR test.
Hepatitis C PCR test (polymerase chain reaction)	This is a blood test to show if you have hepatitis C virus now.	If your result is negative, you don't have the hepatitis C virus now.	If your result is positive, you have hepatitis C. Visit your doctor to talk about the cure.
Dried Blood Spot (DBS) Test	The DBS test is ordered online and you do it at home. The DBS test works by putting a few drops of blood from your finger on a test card and leaving it to dry. You mail the test back to the laboratory for testing. You get the result in about one week by phone, text or email.	If your result is negative, you do not have hepatitis C now.	If the DBS test shows hepatitis C in your blood, you will need to have a blood test to confirm if you have a current infection. A nurse will call you and tell you where to go for a hepatitis C blood test.

Types of hepatitis C tests

Test	Where can I get a hepatitis C test?	How much does the test cost?
Hepatitis C Antibody Test	A doctor or general practitioner (GP) A Sexual Health Clinic Family Planning Clinic	The test is free if you have a Medicare card. You may need to pay the fee if your doctor does not bulk bill.
Hepatitis C PCR test (polymerase chain reaction)	A doctor or general practitioner (GP) A Sexual Health Clinic Family Planning Clinic	The test is free if you have a Medicare card. You may need to pay the fee if your doctor does not bulk bill.
Dried Blood Spot (DBS) Test	You can order a DBS test online www.health.nsw.gov.au/dbstest. When your result is ready, a nurse from Sexual Health Infolink will contact you with your results. If you test positive, the nurse will tell you where you can go for a blood test to confirm the results.	FREE



Treating hepatitis C

What happens after a hepatitis C diagnosis?

You should start your treatment for hepatitis C straight away. The treatment can clear the virus from your body and improve your liver health. Treatments can now cure your hepatitis C virus infection, follow the directions of your health care provider.

What is the treatment for hepatitis C?

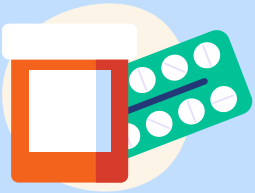
The medications used to treat hepatitis C are called Direct Acting Antivirals (DAAs). They are pills and are simple and safe to take.

Treatment lasts 8 to 12 weeks and once you have completed taking the medication, the virus is cleared from your body.

These medications have few or no side effects, reduce the risk of liver damage and lower the chance of liver cancer.

Around 95% of people are cured with treatment!

Your doctor will explain which medication is best for you.

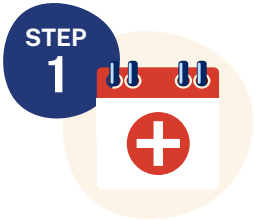


Hepatitis C can be cured with safe and effective medication.

Hepatitis C treatment can reduce your risk of liver damage and liver cancer.

Hepatitis C treatment cures 95% of people living with hepatitis C.

The journey to hepatitis C treatment...



Make an appointment to see your doctor – you may need blood tests

Discuss your tests with your doctor

Your doctor will decide the best treatment for you and write the script for your medication

Take your prescription to the pharmacy

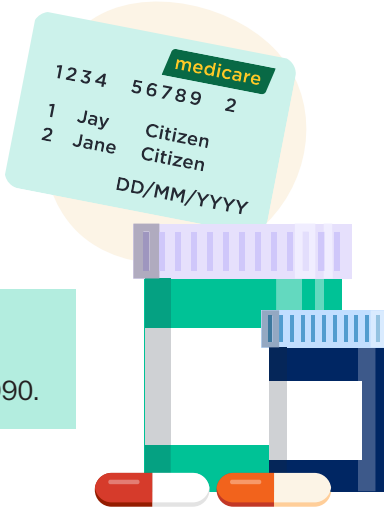
Start taking your medication -take your medication the way the doctor advised you

Follow up with your doctor, 3 months after completing the treatment to check if the hepatitis C virus has cleared through a PCR test.

How much do the medications cost?

Hepatitis C medication is low cost if you have a Medicare card. This means that the Australian Government covers most of the cost and you only pay a small amount.

If you don't have a Medicare card, speak to your doctor. They may assist you with getting hepatitis C treatments at a lower price.



For more information on how to get the medication, contact the **National Hepatitis Info Line** on 1800 437 222 or Hepatitis NSW Infoline 1800 803 990.

If I'm cured, can I get hepatitis C again?

Yes, you can get hepatitis C again even after you have treatment.

The treatment can cure you from hepatitis C by clearing the virus from your body but it does not protect you from getting hepatitis C again. It's important to protect yourself from getting reinfected.

Remember: your hepatitis C antibody test will likely remain positive for the rest of your life, so to check if you have been reinfected, you will need to do a PCR test.

Preventing hepatitis C

How can I protect myself from getting hepatitis C?

There is no vaccine to protect you from the hepatitis C virus.
The best ways to prevent getting hepatitis C include:

Don't share personal items like toothbrushes or razors

Only get tattoos or skin piercings from licensed, trained professionals

Only get medical or dental procedures done by registered professionals

Be careful about getting medical or dental procedures, acupuncture, tattoos and skin piercings overseas

Use condoms and lubricants during sex

Wear gloves when cleaning up blood or other body fluids

Only use your own or new needles and syringes for injecting drugs or steroids

NEVER SHARE ANY INJECTING EQUIPMENT

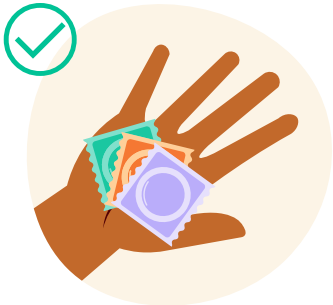
I have hepatitis C: What can I do to prevent giving it to other people?

In the home:

Don't share razors, toothbrushes or nail clippers

Clean up any blood carefully using latex gloves, soap, warm water and bleach

Put any blood stained things such as bandaids, tampons, and sanitary napkins in a plastic bag before putting them in the bin



Always use condoms during sex

I have hepatitis C: What can I do to prevent giving it to other people?

If you inject drugs:

- Never share needles, syringes or other injecting equipment
- Always take care to dispose of your injecting equipment so that no other person can use it.

When travelling overseas:

- Be 'blood aware' – be alert to the presence of blood in any situation
- Tattooing and unsterile injecting should be avoided
- In some countries, dental and medical procedures should be avoided.

Living a healthy life

Living a healthy life

Most people go through hepatitis C treatment without much difficulty. They can continue with their work and family life. But the type of treatment you are on and any other health problems you may have can sometimes make it difficult.

If you have hepatitis C, it is important to help keep your liver healthy by:

Eating healthy food such as more fruits and vegetables. Eat less food that is high in fat, salt and sugar.

Being active. Incorporate exercise into your weekly routine.

Checking with your doctor before taking medications including herbal medications. Some medications can be harmful to your liver.

Taking care of yourself emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you want to talk to a mental health professional your doctor can help you find one.

Not smoking. If you have liver disease, smoking can make it worse. It can increase the risk of fibrosis and liver cancer.

Drinking less or no alcohol. Alcohol can damage your liver over time and increases your risk of getting liver disease and liver cancer.

Your rights and hepatitis C

Your rights and hepatitis C

In Australia there are laws that protect you from discrimination if you have hepatitis C. Having hepatitis C does not mean that it is okay for people to treat you differently.

You have the right to:

Receive care and treatment, even if you don't have a Medicare card.

An interpreter if English is not your first language.

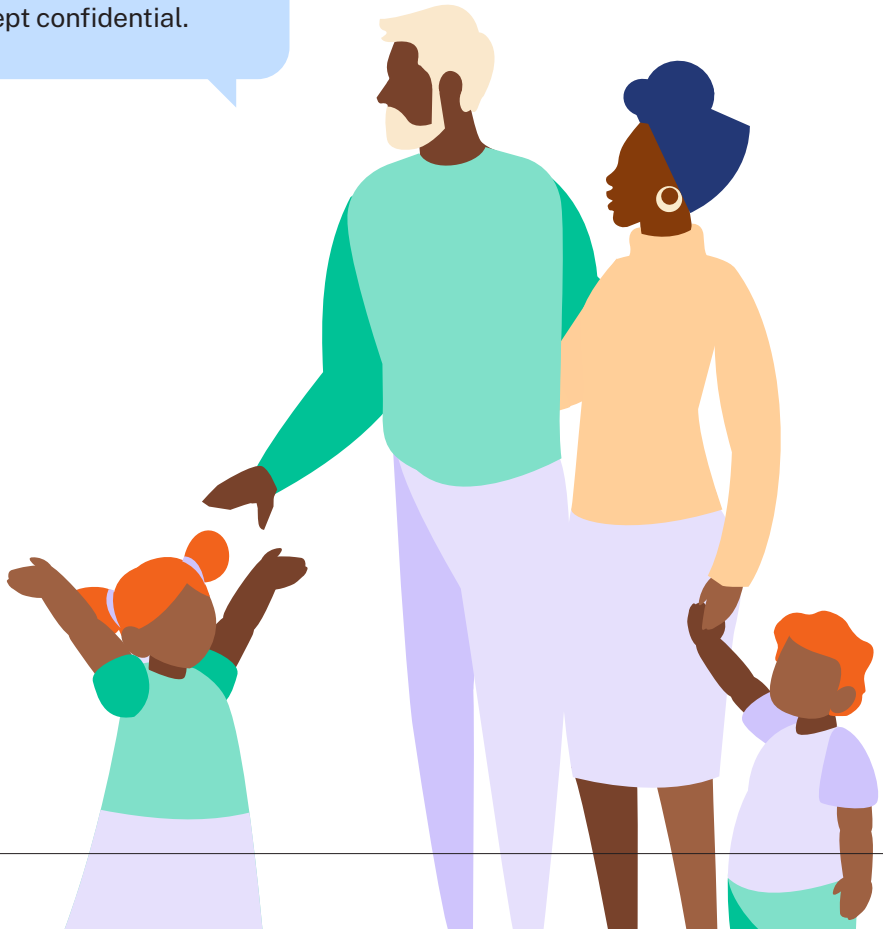
Speak about your concerns if you feel you are treated unfairly or if you are not happy with the care you receive.

Who should I tell that I have hepatitis C?

Your family and friends

It's your choice to tell your family and friends. You may choose not to tell anyone about your hepatitis status, and this is your right. However, it is important to tell people who may have been exposed so they can get tested.

Your doctor might help you make the contact. Your identity will be kept confidential.



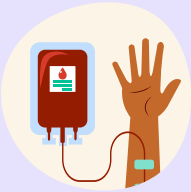
Who should I tell that I have hepatitis C?

Health workers

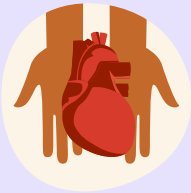
While you do not have to tell health workers, it can be helpful for you because they can:

- Understand your medical history
- Monitor your liver
- Find the right medication
- Refer you to counselling for mental health support
- Make sure your medications don't interact with those for hepatitis C.

You must tell when...



Donating blood, even if you have been cured from the virus



Donating organs or sperm

Applying for health or life insurance

Working for the Australian Defence Force (navy, army, air force)

Applying for a visa to live in Australia

Information and services

Getting information on hepatitis C

- **Multicultural HIV and Hepatitis Service (MHAHS)**
  For information about hepatitis C in other languages: www.mhahs.org.au
- **Hepatitis NSW**
  For resources and information about hepatitis: www.hepc.org.au
- **Hepatitis Australia**
  www.hepatitisaustralia.com
- **NSW Health**
  www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/hepatitis_c.aspx

Getting help from health professionals

- **Hepatitis Helpline**
  in Sydney call (02) 9332-1599 / other NSW regions call 1800 803 990
  https://www.hep.org.au/about-us/contact-us
- **Helplink Australia** - call 1800 437 222 (1800 HEP ABC)
  www.HepLink.au
- **NSW Sexual Health Infolink**
  For hepatitis C test, call 1800 451 624 – Open Monday to Friday
  www.shil.nsw.gov.au
- **NSW service directory:** To find doctors or specialists on Hepatitis C
  www.hep.org.au/resources/nsw-directory-hep-clinics-doctors-specialists
- **Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs):**
  For information and where to find your nearest NSP outlet across NSW:
  www.health.nsw.gov.au/hepatitis/Pages/nsp-outlets.aspx

If you prefer to speak in your language, you can use this **free interpreting service.**

TIS TRANSLATING AND INTERPRETING SERVICE

Call 13 14 50 or
visit www.tisnational.gov.au.

When the interpreter is on the line, ask them to phone the service you want to speak to.

Terms you may hear when talking about hepatitis C

Terms you may hear when talking about hepatitis C

Abdomen	The part of the body that holds the stomach, liver, bowels, and reproductive organs.
Acute	A sickness or symptom that happens quickly or lasts a short time. Flu and urine infections are examples of an acute illness. Some people with a very serious acute illness can die.
Antibody	Something that your immune system makes to fight things that are not normally part of the body, like viruses. The body can remember some antibodies and that helps keep us protected from infection.
Asymptomatic	A person who is sick but does not feel or look sick. If lots of people are sick but don't feel sick, they can help spread a disease.
Blood-borne	It refers to diseases or infections that can pass from one person to another through blood, like hepatitis B and C. These infections can spread also through things like sharing needles, blood transfusions, cuts and wounds coming into contact with infected blood.
Blood-to-blood contact	It happens when the blood from one person mixes with the blood of another person. It can spread blood-borne diseases like hepatitis B and C, HIV.
Blood transfusion	Is a medical procedure where blood is given to a person through a small tube in the arm.
Bulk billing	If your doctor bulk bills, your visit is free because Medicare pays the doctor in full. If your doctor does not fully bulk bill, you pay the doctor part or all of the consultation fee.
Chronic	A disease or symptom that lasts for a long time, usually months or years, and often doesn't go away completely.
Cirrhosis	Scarring of the liver because of injury or long-term disease. Scar tissue cannot perform the functions of liver tissue, so your liver function is not as good as it needs to be.
Condoms	A thin rubber (latex) bag which fits on a man's erect penis to stop pregnancy, and reduce the chance of passing on sexually transmissible infections (STIs) or viruses.
Confidentiality	Means keeping personal information private and not sharing it without permission. Medical confidentiality means anything you tell your doctor or nurse must, by law, be kept private between the two of you and the organisation they work for.

Terms you may hear when talking about hepatitis C

Consent	Means to 'agree' to something. Another word for consent is 'permission'. When a person agrees to do something without anyone forcing them to do it, they are consenting to it. For example, when a patient agrees to a medical procedure, treatment, or test after being explained what it involves.
DAAs	It stands for Direct Acting Antivirals. They are a type of medication taken by mouth (tablet) to treat a virus.
Diagnosis	The conclusion a doctor may reach after examining, doing tests and talking with their patients.
Diarrhea	Is when you have frequent, loose, or watery stools three or more times a day.
Fibrosis	Is when tissues in the body becomes thick and scarred.
Fibroscan	Is a painless test, like an ultrasound, used to check the health of your liver. It measures the scarring and stiffness of the liver.
Inflammation	When there is inflammation in your body, you might see a change in the skin colour or a swelling. It happens when your body tries to heal or fight off bacteria and viruses.
Jaundice	Is when the whites of your eyes and the skin look yellow. It happens when your liver is not working well.
Infection	A sickness you get from germs. Infections can be caused by viruses, bacteria, fungi and parasites.
Liver	The largest organ inside your body. It sits at the top right side of the stomach. It helps to digest food, store energy, and take away poisons of drugs and alcohol from your body.
Liver cancer	Is a disease where not normal cells grow out of control in the liver, causing a harmful tumour.
Loss of appetite	Not feeling hungry or having little to no desire to eat.

Terms you may hear when talking about hepatitis C

Medication	Is a drug or medicine used to treat diseases and other health conditions.
Nausea	When you have an upset stomach or feel like throwing up.
PCR	It stands for Polymerase Chain Reaction. It's a type of test used to check for genetic material in a blood sample to see if virus or bacteria is present.
RNA	It stands for Ribonucleic Acid. An HCV or Hepatitis C RNA test helps doctors confirm if the hepatitis C virus is present and if required, how much of it is in the body.
Side effect	A negative reaction to medication or treatment.
Steroid	A kind of drug or medicine that stops swelling and pain. It helps your body's natural defence against sickness (your immune system).
Symptom	A sign of disease or sickness. It's something that is different in your body that might mean you have a sickness. Symptoms help doctors and nurses work out what the sickness is.
Toxin	A harmful substance or poison.
Transmission	The passing of a disease from one person to another.
Treatment	Something that a person does so that they can stay healthy or get better. It can involve taking medicine, or other therapy to treat or cure a disease, and/or change in lifestyle.
Unsterile	Something that is not clean or free of germs, bacteria, or viruses.
Urine	Is the liquid that comes out of your body when you go to the toilet. Similar words: wee, pee, piss.