

HEPATITIS C

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood borne virus that can cause inflammation and damage to the liver. Hepatitis means inflammation (swelling) of the liver. The liver, located just under the right ribs helps the body to process food, drugs (both prescribed and recreational) and alcohol. Approximately 30% of people who acquire Hepatitis C “clear” the virus spontaneously from their body during the first year of infection.

For those who do not clear the virus, Hepatitis C becomes a chronic condition. An individual can have the virus for many years without experiencing any symptoms although the virus is present in their blood and can be spread by blood to blood contact.

There are at least 6 types of hepatitis C called genotypes which are all slightly different. Currently there is no vaccine for Hepatitis C but treatment is available and can be effective.

HOW IS HEPATITIS TRANSMITTED?

Hepatitis C is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact. The most common mode of transmission in Australia is by sharing drug-injecting equipment such as needles, spoons and syringes and tourniquets.

Transmission can also be spread by

- Unsterile / unclean tattoo or body piercing equipment
- Needle stick injury in the health care setting
- The risk of acquisition of hepatitis C from a blood transfusion declined when anti body testing began in 1990 and further declined in 2000 when additional RNA screening was introduced. The risk is now extremely low - see www.Transfusion.com.au for further information.
- Sharing toothbrushes, razor blades or other personal items that have come in contact with Hepatitis C infected blood
- Unsafe medical or vaccination practices, blood transfusions or blood products and mass immunisation provided in some countries outside of Australia

- One person's blood coming into contact with open cuts of another person
- Pregnancy or childbirth carries a very small risk. On rare occasions the mother with hepatitis C may pass the virus to their babies during pregnancy, or at the time of birth. Breastfeeding is considered a safe practice, however bleeding or cracked nipples can carry a risk
- Blood to blood contact during sex – the risk is very low, but the risk is increased in certain sexual practices or circumstances that involve blood to blood contact

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Many people may not feel ill when first infected with the hepatitis C virus. Others may find their urine becomes dark and their eyes and skin may turn yellow (jaundice) or may experience minor ‘flu-like’ symptoms. These symptoms may resolve within a couple weeks but this does not mean that the virus has also gone.

When the person has had the virus for more than six months the illness is called chronic hepatitis C. Symptoms of chronic hepatitis C may include:

- mild or severe lethargy (tiredness),
- loss of appetite,
- nausea and vomiting,
- soreness in upper right part of the belly (under the ribs),
- fever or flu-like symptoms, or
- pain in the joints.

This fact sheet is designed to provide you with information on Hepatitis C. It is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with your doctor. All clients are strongly advised to check with their doctor about any specific questions or concerns they may have. Every effort has been taken to ensure that the information in this pamphlet is correct at the time of printing.

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HOW CAN I PREVENT HEPATITIS C?

At present there is no vaccine available to prevent a person from being infected with hepatitis C. Ways to avoid coming in contact with hepatitis C include:

- Avoid sharing personal items such as toothbrushes, razors, nail files or nail clippers/scissors, as these can puncture the skin and have small amounts of blood on them.
- If you are involved in bodily piercing, tattooing, electrolysis or acupuncture, always ensure that any instrument that pierces the skin is sterile.
- Health care workers should follow standard precautions (infection control guidelines) at all times.
- Wherever possible, wear single-use gloves if you give someone first aid or clean up blood or body fluids.
- Although hepatitis C is not considered to be a sexually transmissible infection in Australia, always practice 'safe sex' if blood is going to be present.

For people who inject drugs:

- Always wash your hands before injecting
- Never share needles, syringes or any other equipment such as tourniquets, spoons, swabs or water as they can also be contaminated. New needles and syringes are available from some chemists and Needle and Syringe Program outlets.
- To find out where you can obtain new needles and syringes, contact DirectLine on 1800 888 236.

IS THERE A TEST FOR HEPATITIS C?

An antibody blood test can tell you whether or not you have been infected with hepatitis C. It may take up to six months from the time of infection before a blood test can detect antibodies to hepatitis C.

If you have a positive hepatitis C antibody test, specialised laboratories can do an additional test called hepatitis C PCR to determine if the virus is still present in your blood or liver.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT?

Combination treatments using medications called pegylated interferon and ribarivin have greatly improved the outcomes for people with hepatitis C. These treatments help decrease inflammation in the liver and can clear the virus in 30 to 65 per cent of people. Successful treatment depends on many factors and it may not benefit everyone. There are also some side effects related to these hepatitis C medicines. It is important to talk with your doctor about treatment options.

In general, people who have hepatitis C will feel better if they:

- Avoid drinking alcohol and using drugs which are processed in the liver
- Eat a well-balanced, low fat diet
- Do regular exercise
- Consult their doctor regularly

IS THERE HELP AVAILABLE?

- Your doctor
- A liver specialist (gastroenterologist) referred by your doctor
- Hepatitis C Council of Victoria
Tel. (03) 9380 4644 or 1800 703 003
www.hepcvic.org.au
- Information on hepatitis C and safe drug use: VIVAIDS (03) 9419 3633
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for information about where to get clean needles and syringes for drug users
- Communicable Disease Control Unit, Department of Human Services
Tel. 1300 651 160

REFERENCES

- Australasian Society for HIV Medicine Inc (2006) NSW/ACT/VIC. Hepatitis C in brief (online).
Better Health Channel (2007). Hepatitis C (online).
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