

# HEPATITIS C

## WHAT IS HEPATITIS?

- ‘Hepatitis’ means inflammation or swelling of the liver. It can be caused by chemicals or drugs, drinking too much alcohol, or by different kinds of viral infections.
- There are a number of different hepatitis viruses: A, B, C, D, E. They are all completely different; they cause different illnesses and may require different treatments.

## WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

- Hepatitis C is a liver inflammation caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Before the virus was identified in 1989, hepatitis C was known as non-A/non-B hepatitis. Currently, there is no vaccine to prevent HCV infection.

## HOW DO YOU CATCH HEPATITIS C?

- HCV is nearly always caught through blood-to-blood contact with someone who is infected. This involves sharing of drug injecting equipment, unsafe tattooing or skin piercing, receiving blood transfusions prior to February 1990, needle-stick injuries, or unsterile medical procedures. Since February 1990, Australian blood banks have screened donated blood for HCV.

## HOW DOES HEPATITIS C AFFECT PEOPLE?

- Of every 100 people exposed to HCV, approximately 25 will clear the virus within four to six weeks of infection. The other 75 will develop a chronic or ongoing infection.
- When people are first infected with HCV, there is usually no sign of illness. Over a long period of time HCV infection goes on to affect different people to varying degrees.

## IS THERE A TEST FOR HEPATITIS C?

- A blood test showing presence of antibodies to the virus is evidence of present or past infection. If a person tests positive for the antibodies to hepatitis C, and has a definite risk factor for exposure to blood and/or abnormal liver function tests, it is likely they have hepatitis C and are infectious.
- PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) tests can determine the presence of HCV in blood (the PCR viral detection test). PCR tests can also determine the amount of virus circulating in the blood (the PCR viral load test), and the HCV sub-type with which the person is infected (the PCR genotype test).

- Other blood tests, called liver function tests, may suggest if someone has any liver damage.
- A liver biopsy—studying a tiny sample of liver tissue—is the only accurate way of telling whether the liver is damaged.

## IS THERE ANY TREATMENT FOR HEPATITIS C?

- Current government-funded treatment involves the drug Interferon. People who do not respond to Interferon treatment may then be offered government-funded ‘combination therapy’ with Interferon and Ribavirin. A person with hepatitis C has to meet certain conditions to receive government-funded treatments.
- *Interferon* helps the body fight the virus and helps prevent the virus from multiplying. It leads to a good long-term response for around 10–25 per cent of people who try it.
- *Combination treatment* involves Interferon injections and Ribavirin tablets. To date, HCV genotypes 2 and 3 have been shown to have a higher long-term response rate to combination therapy (up to 70 per cent) than genotypes 1 and 4 (up to 40 per cent). Overall, a person’s chance of responding well to combination therapy is related to their hepatitis C genotype and the amount of virus in their blood. If people have responded to Interferon but then relapsed, there is still a good chance of response to combination therapy. Those who did not respond at all to previous Interferon have only a low chance of responding to combination therapy.
- Both Interferon and combination therapy can have serious side effects and need to be carefully monitored. For more detailed information on these treatments, phone the NSW Hep C Helpline or speak to your doctor.
- *Herbal and other complementary therapy treatments:* some of these therapies may reduce liver damage and improve overall health. If people seek treatment from a complementary therapist they should:
  1. make sure the therapist has experience in working with hepatitis C;
  2. ensure they are properly qualified and belong to a recognised professional organisation;
  3. ask how much the treatment will cost;
  4. ask how they have measured the health outcomes of their therapy;
  5. find doctors and complementary health practitioners who will work together.

## SELF-MANAGEMENT

- People with hepatitis C can consider the following actions to improve their health:
  1. stop drinking alcohol, or cut down alcohol intake
  2. consider having hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccinations
  3. eat a balanced diet
  4. learn how to manage stress
  5. seek counselling if needed
  6. rest when feeling unwell
  7. when taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs, check with a doctor and follow the directions carefully
  8. talk to someone close about feelings or problems
  9. if injecting drugs, use safer injecting methods.

## CAN PARTNERS OR KIDS CATCH IT?

- Hepatitis C cannot be caught by hugging, or sharing plates, cutlery, toilets or washing machines. Although HCV is rarely passed on sexually, all sexually active people need to consider safe sex due to the range of sexually transmissible diseases with which they can become infected.
- There is a small chance the virus will be passed on to a baby during pregnancy or at birth. The risk is increased if the mother has only just become infected (or re-infected) or if she has serious liver damage. HCV does not seem to be passed on via breast milk.

## HOW CAN WE STOP THE HEPATITIS C VIRUS FROM SPREADING?

- People with HCV should not donate blood, sperm or organs.
- People who inject shouldn't share *any* injecting equipment, including needles and syringes, spoons, filters, water, swabs and tourniquets. Hands should be washed thoroughly before and after injecting.
- Ideally, people should use a new fit for every hit. Tables or benches should be wiped down before people prepare a hit. Used fits should be disposed of in a fitpack or sealed plastic container (for example, a juice bottle).
- Blood spills should be wiped up with absorbent paper towel and the spill site cleaned with detergent and water.
- Cuts and wounds should be covered with waterproof dressings (for example, band-aids).

- Body piercing and tattooing should be done at shops that use proper methods of sterilisation.
- Razors, toothbrushes or nail scissors shouldn't be shared.
- People should use condoms for sex that might involve blood to blood contact.

## HEPATITIS C AND INJECTING DRUG USE

- Injecting drugs (past or present) is the most common risk factor for contracting HCV. The majority of people who have injected drugs have hepatitis C. Those people who inject and don't have hepatitis C are at great risk of infection.
- Anyone who has ever shared injecting equipment may have possibly caught hepatitis C. It doesn't matter what was injected—heroin, methadone, pills, speed or steroids—it is how the drugs are injected that is a risk for transmitting infection.
- People who inject drugs will benefit from good medical follow-up after a hepatitis C diagnosis is made. Knowing about hepatitis C status is an important part of deciding to make the recommended lifestyle changes to improve health (see Self-Management section above).
- For those people who already have hepatitis C, it's important to inject as safely as possible to avoid passing the virus on to others or becoming reinfected with a different HCV genotype or sub-type. It is believed that reinfection may cause a more serious form of illness or place a greater strain on the liver.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- People should speak to their doctor. If necessary your doctor can also refer you to a liver specialist.
- Information on general community support services can be found in the front of local telephone books.
- Ring the NSW Hep C Helpline on 9332 1599 or 1800 803 990
- ADIS (Alcohol & Drug Information Service) 9361 2111 1800 422 599
- NUAA (NSW Users & AIDS Association) 9369 3455 1800 644 413

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