



The Gender Centre Inc. Fact Sheet

Hepatitis C Brochure

Description, Infection, Treatment

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What is Hepatitis?

Hepatitis simply means inflammation of the liver. It can be caused by alcohol, chemicals, drugs or viral infections. Hepatitis infections caused by different viruses can produce similar symptoms but their prevention, treatment and control may differ because the viruses are quite different organisms – ask your doctor for more information.

What is Hepatitis C?

It is liver inflammation caused by the hepatitis C virus (H.C.V.). Before the virus was identified in 1989, hepatitis C was known as non–A non–B hepatitis. There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.

How do you catch Hepatitis C?

H.C.V. is nearly always caught through blood to blood contact with someone who is already infected. This involves sharing drug–injecting equipment, tattooing, skin piercing, receiving blood transfusions prior to 1990, needle stick injuries or renal dialysis. Since February 1990, Australian blood banks have screened donated blood for H.C.V.

Is there a test for Hepatitis C?

An antibody blood test showing presence of antibodies to the virus is evidence of present or past infection. If you test positive for the antibodies, it is likely you have hepatitis C and are infectious.

Other blood tests (called liver function tests), may suggest if there is any liver damage.

A liver biopsy (studying a piece of liver) is an accurate way of telling whether the liver is damaged.

How might it affect me?

When people catch H.C.V., usually there is no sign of infection. Over a long period of time though, H.C.V. infection affects people to varying degrees. Of 100 people exposed to H.C.V., approximately 20 will clear the virus themselves within 4–6 weeks of infection. This means their infection is ongoing and long term.

Of these 80 people:

- around 20 people will not develop symptoms and will remain well;
- around 40 people may develop some liver damage and will eventually experience symptoms (the classic hepatitis symptom is tiredness);

- over 20 years, around 20 people will develop cirrhosis (scarred liver tissue); and
- after a further 5–10 years, 10 of these people will develop liver cancer or liver failure (liver failure often means a liver transplant is done).

Is there any treatment?

One proven treatment (called Interferon) leads to a good long-term response for around 15–40% of people who try it. Interferon helps the body fight the virus from multiplying. The drug does have side effects and treatment needs to be carefully monitored.

Some herbal and other natural therapy treatments may reduce liver damage and improve overall health.

If you seek treatment from a natural therapist you may want to consider:

- making sure they have proven experience in working with hepatitis C;
- ensuring they are properly qualified and belong to a recognised membership organisation;
- how much the treatment will cost you; and
- how they have measured the health outcomes of their therapy.

It would be to your benefit if you can find practitioners who will work together.

What can I do myself?

If you drink alcohol, try to limit yourself to 7 standard drinks a week or less. Consider drinking low-alcohol drinks and alternating non-alcoholic and alcoholic drinks. Try avoiding situations where there is pressure to drink heavily and avoid binge drinking.

Eat a well balanced diet that is low in animal fats (buy lean meats & low fat dairy products).

Avoid stress as much as you can and rest when you feel unwell.

Will my partner or kids catch it?

Hepatitis C cannot be caught by hugging, or sharing plates, cutlery, toilets etc. Although H.C.V. is rarely passed on sexually, all sexually active people need to consider safe sex due to the range of sexually transmitted diseases.

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. H.C.V. does not seem to be passed on via breast milk.

How can we stop H.C.V. spreading?

In general, try to prevent transmission of H.C.V.:

- do not donate blood, sperm or body organs if you have hepatitis C;
- don't share any injecting equipment, including needles and syringes, spoons, filters, water, swabs & tourniquets. Wash your hands thoroughly. Avoid getting blood on your fingers and hands. Ideally, use a new fit for every hit;

- wipe up blood spills with household bleach;
- cover cuts and wounds with waterproof dressings (band-aids etc);
- have body piercing and tattooing done at shops that use good methods of sterilisation.
- don't share razors, toothbrushes or nail scissors; and
- Avoid sex that involves blood to blood contact.

Hepatitis C & injecting drug use

Hepatitis C has become a major problem for people who inject drugs. Most people who "use" have hepatitis C so those users who don't have hepatitis C must be seen as being at great risk of infection.

It doesn't matter what is injected – heroin, methadone, pills, speed or steroids – it is how the drugs are injected that is the important thing.

H.I.V. prevention strategies (harm reduction) should prevent H.C.V. transmission in most circumstances. Users should adopt these practices to prevent passing on the virus and to avoid infection or being re-infected with a different strain of H.C.V.

Users need adequate medical follow-up after an H.C.V. diagnosis is made. Awareness of injecting practice and recommended lifestyle changes.

Users can obtain specific and accurate information on injecting drug use, harm minimisation and hepatitis C from N.U.A.A. and the Hepatitis C Council of N.S.W.

Where can I get more information?

- N.S.W. Hepatitis C Info & Support Phone Line Sydney (02) 9332 1599 or N.S.W. 1800 803 990
- Hepatitis C Council of N.S.W., Sydney (02) 9332 1853
- Speak to your doctor. If necessary he or she can also refer you to a liver specialist
- N.U.A.A., Sydney (02) 9369 3455
- your local needle exchange worker.

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