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# Hepatitis C

Affecting About 1 in 200 People in Australia.

by Tanya

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**H**epatitis C, formerly known as Hepatitis non-A non-B, is not related to the other hepatitis viruses although the others also affect the liver. It had remained a mystery until 1989 when scientists discovered the specific antibodies in the blood to the virus that has been around for about twenty years. It is believed that about 1 in 200 people carry the virus in Australia.

When someone catches the Hepatitis C virus, their body produces antibodies to try to destroy it. More often than not, the antibody response fails to identify the hepatitis C virus properly and it evades the body's defence system. The infection then remains long-term. Most infected people don't know that they have the virus. This is because for some people there will be no symptoms and for others, symptoms take an average thirteen years to develop. Some people may have hepatitis C for twenty years or more before finding out.

Hepatitis C may damage the liver. The damage may be slight or serious. At this stage there is not enough known about Hepatitis C to predict what will happen for any one person. However, it seems at present that if 100 people catch hepatitis C, fifteen to twenty people will get rid of it in the first month or so, sixty people will have a long-term infection that may cause no problems or may cause levels of liver damage ranging from mild to serious. Symptoms that can range from mild to severe will occur. These may include tiredness, abdominal discomfort and nausea. Twenty to twenty-five people will have a long-term infection that leads to serious liver damage after twenty years. Of these people, ten to fifteen will remain stable and the other ten will progress to liver failure or liver cancer after another five to ten years.

Hepatitis C infection doesn't always make people sick. When someone does get sick, symptoms take a long time to develop (approximately thirteen years). Symptoms often stay at a certain level and don't always get worse.

Transmission of H.C.V. is nearly always through blood to blood contact, but unlike H.I.V., the virus can survive longer outside of the body.

Sharing of injecting drug equipment, unsafe tattooing and body piercing, blood transfusions and use of blood products before 1990 are the highest risks. Other activities involving blood contact are risky but much lower. Needle stick injuries, sharing razor blades or toothbrushes, sexual transmission and blood transfusions after 1990 are included here.

There remains a very high incidence of H.C.V. in the injecting drug using community. The new message now is **if possible, keep everything separate from other users.**

Use your own fits, spoons, filters, water, tourniquet and swabs. Sharing fits is not an option even if you use bleach three times, which is the method suggested to kill H.I.V. It may not kill H.C.V. Stopping the bleeding with fingers also involves risks if someone has had blood on their fingertips and then helps someone else. Shared tourniquets may also carry blood from one person to the next. Try to use all your own equipment when injecting. With other people, in case of overdose, the safer way is to inject yourself. The safest way, of course, to avoid the virus is to smoke, snort or swallow drugs.

If you would like to be tested, you need to wait six months after the contact with H.C.V., before the antibodies can be detected. The test is free if you take your Medicare card to a doctor who bulk bills.

You are under no legal obligation to tell anyone if you have Hepatitis C. However, there are various treatments that can be investigated. At present there is no cure, but trials with the drug Interferon are showing some promise. Lifestyle is also important. Controlling alcohol use, eating a healthy balanced diet, planned exercise, managing stress, getting adequate rest and giving up smoking all help to keep you as healthy as possible.

For transys with Hepatitis C on hormones, there does not appear to be a problem with further liver damage, unless the damage is already serious. Oral hormones will be processed through the liver whereas patches and injections are not. However, this should not be a concern for most people with Hepatitis C.

Unfortunately, there just isn't enough information on Hep. C. because it is so new to dentists. But the Hepatitis C hotline is in place for people in N.S.W. who want information or support. The numbers are 9332-1599 and 1800 803 990. Or you can call us at the Gender Centre on 9569-2366 for any questions you might have. As limited as it can be, we do still have more information on hormones and other tranny specific areas and will be keeping up to date as the research comes out. In the mean time, stay safe and be well.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.