

Hepatitis C Brochure

CANADIAN LIVER FOUNDATION

HEPATITIS C - a liver disease

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) which was first identified in 1989. Hepatitis C is spread by direct contact with the blood of an infected person. Hepatitis C differs from hepatitis A, which is spread through eating or drinking contaminated food or water; and hepatitis B, which can be spread through blood contact with any body fluid of an infected person.

Who is at risk?

People at risk for hepatitis C include the following:

- Blood transfusion recipients prior to 1990
- People who use injection drugs or share drug-related equipment
- People with tattoos and body piercing acquired with non-sterile equipment

How does someone get hepatitis C?

The most common means of transmission is through injection drug use, even if the drug use was many years ago or happened only once. Sharing needles or any drug-related equipment is enough to spread hepatitis C.

Another way of getting hepatitis C is through a blood transfusion from a donor who has hepatitis C – especially for those people who received a blood transfusion prior to 1990. The risk of getting HCV in this way is now extremely low because of the universal testing of all blood donors.

Activities such as tattooing and body piercing, which may be performed without sterile precautions, sharing toothbrushes and razors, or any kind of blood-to-blood contact with an infected person can also spread the hepatitis C virus. The risk of getting HCV infection through ordinary household or workplace interactions is extremely low.

Could I get hepatitis C from having unprotected sexual intercourse?

The rate of transmission by sexual contact - either heterosexual or homosexual - is considered to be very low.

In spite of the low risk, long-term monogamous couples must decide for themselves about routine condom use. They should, however, avoid unprotected intercourse during menstrual

periods if the woman is HCV positive. People with multiple sexual partners should always practise safe sex, not only to decrease the small risk of hepatitis C transmission, but to minimize the risk of acquiring other infections.

Can I have children or breastfeed if I have hepatitis C?

The risk of passing hepatitis C to your newborn is approximately 5 %. Cesarean section is not recommended to prevent HCV infection. Breastfeeding does not appear to transmit hepatitis C unless nipples are cracked or bleeding.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Most people with hepatitis C have no symptoms and may feel quite healthy. Others may develop fatigue, jaundice (yellowing of the eyes and skin), abdominal and joint pain, nausea and loss of appetite.

How do I know if I have hepatitis C?

Most people with hepatitis C are unaware they have it and can carry it unknowingly for decades. Only a blood test can detect the hepatitis C virus infection. If you think you may have been exposed to HCV through high-risk behaviour, major surgery, a blood transfusion or blood products and are concerned, you should see your physician and discuss whether or not you should be tested.

What happens if I test positive?

If you test positive for antibodies to HCV, your physician should do a follow-up blood test to see whether actual viral material can be found in your blood, along with blood tests to check the state of your liver. Approximately 15-25% of people infected with HCV have a mild, brief disease and get rid of the virus completely. In this case, the antibodies to HCV usually remain detectable in the blood but the actual viral material does not. However, most people who get hepatitis C will have HCV infection for a long time, and possibly for the rest of their lives.

Your family physician may refer you to a specialist to determine whether or not you require treatment. You may wish to contact the Canadian Liver Foundation to learn about support groups and education materials available through this organization.

How do I live with hepatitis C?

It is important for people living with hepatitis C to implement lifestyle changes, including:

- Maintain a healthy body weight
- Eat a well-balanced, nutritious diet
- Exercise regularly
- Avoid alcohol
- Avoid high-risk behaviours

- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

For some hepatitis C patients drug treatment may be appropriate and must be administered after careful assessment by a physician. The current standard of care is a combination of pegylated interferons taken by injection once a week plus ribavirin pills taken daily. Depending on the HCV genotype, cure rates range from 50 to 90%. New drugs are being developed. No herbal remedies have been shown to be useful.

What happens as the disease progresses?

Most people with chronic hepatitis C feel well for many years. In 10 % - 20% of patients, chronic hepatitis C leads to cirrhosis – irreversible and potentially fatal scarring of the liver. In severe cases, hepatitis C may lead to liver cancer or liver failure. Hepatitis C is one of the most common reasons why people need to have liver transplants in Canada. The earlier you find out that you have hepatitis C, the more likely it is that treatment could be successful.

How can I protect others?

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C there is no need to become socially isolated, but there are common-sense precautions you should take to avoid spreading the virus:

- Do not give blood
- Do not share razors or toothbrushes
- If you use drugs, do not share needles or other drug-related equipment
- Inform health professionals who care for you and may be exposed to your blood that you have hepatitis C
- Although sexual transmission is rare, inform your sexual partner(s) that you have hepatitis C and take appropriate precautions
- There is no vaccine for hepatitis C prevention.

Established in 1969, the Canadian Liver Foundation (CLF) was the first organization in the world devoted to providing support for research and education into the causes, diagnosis, prevention and treatment of liver disease. CLF provides information and education programs for patients, families and the general public through more than 30 volunteer chapters across the country.

Because hepatitis C is a liver disease, the Canadian Liver Foundation is committed to providing information and education about this increasingly prevalent infection. This is a rapidly changing field of medicine; information in this pamphlet is current for October 2006.

For more information about hepatitis C or other liver diseases, please call 416-491-3353 or 1-800-563-5483.

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