

## ADVICE FOR HEPATITIS C INFECTED INDIVIDUALS

### What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver which can cause permanent damage or lead to liver cancer. About 75-85% of those infected with the Hepatitis C virus (HCV) will carry the virus for life and can infect others. Symptoms may appear 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure to the virus, but 90% of people have no signs of illness at time of infection. Symptoms include, chronic fatigue, lack of appetite, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, itchiness, jaundice (yellow eyes and skin), and joint and muscle aches.

### How is HCV spread?

- Through contact with blood or body fluids containing blood of an infected person. The infected fluids must enter through a break in the skin.
- By sharing drug related equipment such as needles, spoons, straws, and filters.
- By using non-sterile equipment for tattooing, body piercing, acupuncture and aesthetic procedures.
- Receiving blood transfusions or blood products that have not been screened for hepatitis C. Since 1992, blood donations in Canada are screened for the hepatitis C virus.
- Sexual transmission is very low. The risk may increase when there are open genital sores and during menstrual periods.
- 1- 5% of women who have HCV pass it on to their babies before or at the time of birth. This increases to 10-15% if the mother also has HIV.
- Breastfeeding does not pass HCV from mother to baby. If the nipples are bleeding or cracked it is recommended that breast feeding be stopped until healed.

Hepatitis C is not spread by water, food, kissing, sneezing or coughing.

### How can I prevent spreading HCV?

- Never donate blood or semen.
- Do not share personal care items that could come in contact with blood (razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, nail files).
- Cover cuts or sores on your skin with bandages.
- Dispose of blood stained articles (tampons, dental floss, bandages) in a tied plastic bag.
- In situations where blood is present (such as a cut or nosebleed) be sure anyone helping you wears protective gloves.
- If you are getting a tattoo, body piercing, acupuncture or esthetic procedure done, ensure that only new or sterile equipment is used.
- The risk of sexual transmission is low, but is not zero.

- Use a condom or dental dam for sexual activities where blood may be involved, if you have multiple partners, or if you or your partner is menstruating.
- Tell your doctor, dentist or any other health care providers who may be exposed to your blood that you have Hepatitis C.
- Even if you have been infected once with Hepatitis C, you can become infected again with a different subtype. There is no vaccine available to protect you from hepatitis C.

### How is hepatitis C detected?

Hepatitis C is detected through two blood tests. The first tests for hepatitis C antibodies to show if you have come in contact with the hepatitis C virus. The second blood test, Hepatitis C Ribonucleic Acid (HCV RNA) will determine if the virus is still present in your blood. It is important to complete the second blood test if the first is positive as 15-25% of those infected with HCV will clear the virus on their own without treatment. There are other tests your doctor may order to see if the virus has affected your liver.

### Is there treatment?

Yes there is treatment. Treatment is taken for six months to one year to eliminate the virus. Speak to your specialist for information about treatment options.

### Things to do to keep healthy

- See your doctor regularly for medical follow-up. Ask your doctor about free Hepatitis A and B vaccine.
- To minimize further damage to your liver avoid alcohol and smoking.
- Before taking any prescription or non prescription medications talk to your doctor or pharmacist.
- Maintain healthy eating habits.
- Get adequate rest and regular exercise.

### Publicly funded hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccine is available and recommended for individuals who are hepatitis C positive.

#### Further information can be obtained from:

Peel Public Health at 905-799-7700  
[www.peelregion.ca](http://www.peelregion.ca)

Canadian Liver Foundation  
(416) 491-3353 or 1-(800) 563-5483  
[www.liver.ca](http://www.liver.ca)

CATIE Hepatitis C  
1-800-263-1638  
[www.hepcinfo.ca](http://www.hepcinfo.ca)