

# HEPATITIS C: GET THE FACTS!

## LIVING WITH HEPATITIS C



### WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C (Hep C or HCV) is a virus that affects the liver. It lives in an infected person's blood and is spread when the blood (or body fluids containing blood) of someone living with hepatitis C comes in direct contact with someone else's blood. High risk activities for hepatitis C include sharing equipment for drug use, tattooing, or piercing, and receiving a blood transfusion or other blood products before 1990. See *Know Your Risks & Get Tested* (information sheet) for more information.

### WHAT IS MY LIVER? AND WHAT DO I NEED IT FOR?

Your liver is the largest internal organ in your body—weighing about 3 pounds. You can't live without your liver—everything you eat, drink or breathe gets filtered by your liver. It carries out hundreds of important jobs in your body including:

- ◆ Cleaning alcohol, drugs, chemicals, and other poisons from your blood
- ◆ Breaking down medicines and helping to digest your food
- ◆ Storing vitamins and other nutrients your body needs
- ◆ Stopping cuts from bleeding and protecting you from germs
- ◆ Making, storing, and giving you energy
- ◆ Helping build strong bones and muscles



### WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HEPATITIS C?

Not everyone has symptoms when they have hepatitis C. Some people live with it for 10-25 years before getting any—often not knowing they have it. When people experience symptoms they are often 'flu-like' and may include:

- ◆ Low energy and feeling really tired, difficulty sleeping
- ◆ Loss of appetite and weight loss
- ◆ Irritable bowel syndrome, diarrhea, pale, bloody or tar-like stools (poop)
- ◆ Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach), vomiting
- ◆ Pain in joints and muscles
- ◆ Jaundice (yellow looking skin/eyes and/or dark colored urine)
- ◆ Itchy skin and/or depression
- ◆ Difficulty remembering things and staying focused, feeling confused
- ◆ Pain in the upper right side just below the rib cage

### **IN N.B., 1517**

people tested positive for Hep C between 1996-2003. An est. 251,000 people are living with Hep C in Canada. About 5,000 people get it each year—most don't know it.

### WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ACUTE & CHRONIC HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C can be acute or chronic. **Acute hepatitis C** is when someone gets rid of his/her hepatitis C infection in 6 months or less. After this, the virus is no longer in the blood. This occurs in about 15-25% of people. No one knows why this happens or who it will happen to. **Chronic hepatitis C** is when someone has the virus for more than 6 months. Most people (75-85%) have this type. To see if a person has acute or chronic hepatitis C a second test, the Viral Count Test, may be done after he/she tests positive through the initial Hepatitis C Antibody Test.

### I HAVE CHRONIC HEPATITIS C, NOW WHAT?

It is important not to let hepatitis C take over your life. Try and maintain a positive attitude and remember that you are not alone. Natural feelings that people go through after finding out they have hepatitis C include denial, anger, frustration, depression, guilt, bargaining, and acceptance. Everyone deals with his/her diagnosis differently. Discuss your treatment options with your doctor and take steps to live a healthy lifestyle. Support groups are available.

## **WHAT CAN I DO TO STAY HEALTHY?**

There are many things you can do to help you and your liver stay healthy:

- ◆ Don't drink any alcohol—it is very hard on your liver
- ◆ Stop using street drugs and talk to your doctor and pharmacist about using over the counter drugs—many of these are also hard on your liver
- ◆ Get vaccinated for hepatitis A and hepatitis B—its free
- ◆ Reduce your stress level—remember to take time for yourself
- ◆ Exercise regularly (at your comfort level) and eat a well balanced diet
- ◆ Maintain regular sleeping hours and get enough rest—take powers naps
- ◆ Take steps to not get infected with another type of hepatitis C or with HIV—these can complicate your treatment options
- ◆ Visit your doctor regularly and make sure that the health of your liver is getting monitored properly—a variety of tests are used in this process
- ◆ If you can't quit using drugs or alcohol, try to reduce the amount you use



**GET VACCINATED**  
for hepatitis A and B  
if you are living with  
hepatitis C—its free.  
Also, don't drink  
alcohol or do drugs,  
limit caffeine and  
nicotine—these can  
damage your liver.

## **HOW CAN I AVOID GIVING OTHERS HEPATITIS C?**

If you have hepatitis C it is important to take steps to prevent giving it to others. Some of these steps also help prevent you from getting re-infected with a different type of hepatitis C or HIV. They include:

- ◆ Never share needles, syringes, crack-pipes, straws or other drug equipment
- ◆ Do not donate blood or organs
- ◆ Do not share personal care items like toothbrushes, razors or nail clippers
- ◆ Inform your sexual partners you have hepatitis C—always use condoms
- ◆ Cover cuts or open sores on your skin

## **WHAT ABOUT TREATMENT?**

Not everyone who has chronic hepatitis C requires treatment. Also, some people are not good candidates for treatment—for example, if someone is pregnant or uses drugs and alcohol. There is currently no cure for hepatitis C but there are different treatment options available that work really well for some people.

The current treatment is called Pegetron. This is a combination of two drugs that work together to strengthen the immune system's response to the virus. Pegetron is taken both orally and by injection. Not everyone is able to take Pegetron but other treatment options do exist for these people (not as effective). Treatment lasts from 24-48 weeks depending on the type of hepatitis C and the health of the person. Side effects include fever, headache, tiredness, and sometimes depression.

Some people choose to use alternative therapies and natural remedies (examples include energy healing, acupuncture, herbs/vitamins). Make sure you tell your doctor if you use this type of treatment and don't use it in place of medical care.

## **WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW IF I HAVE HIV AND HEPATITIS C?**

People who are living with both hepatitis C and HIV (co-infected) are faced with a number of unique issues. Treating both at the same time is more difficult and people living with both are at increased risk of liver damage. Talk to your doctor about the other ways living with HIV and hepatitis C affects your body.

**Sources:** (1) *Pegetron* (CATIE, 2003); (2) *HCV and HCV/HIV Co-infection Fact Sheet* (CAAN); (3) *Surviving Hepatitis C And Risks in Prison...the Facts* (JHSGM, 2002); (4) *Living with Hepatitis C—A Support Guide* (Hepatitis C Moncton); (5) *HVC—Things You Should Know* (CAS); (6) *Communicable Disease Reports 1996-2003* (Government of New Brunswick); (7) *Occupational Exposure to HBV, HCV, and HIV*

**For more information on hepatitis C, body art, safer sex, and/or HIV please call our toll free, anonymous, & confidential help-line at 1-800-561-4009.**