



## Hepatitis C

### What is Hepatitis C?

The term "hepatitis" is used to describe a common form of liver injury. Hepatitis simply means "inflammation of the liver". There are many causes of hepatitis; examples include alcohol, certain drugs, poisonous mushrooms, and viruses. Hepatitis C is a virus that had been known as "non-A non-B" hepatitis was finally identified in 1989.

### What do I need to do?

- Do not share toothbrushes, razors, hair brushes
- Avoid alcohol, herbs and Panadol (paracetamol) in doses over 2gm a day
- Do not donate blood, plasma, body organs, tissue, or sperm.
- Cover all cuts or sores, wash your hands after touching your blood or other body fluids
- Carefully dispose of menstrual pads and tampons
- Do not share syringes and needles

### Can I Give the Disease to Others?

HCV can be transmitted through infected blood, instruments, needles, and bodily fluids, though rarely through sexual transmission. There are documented cases of people with chronic hepatitis C transmitting the virus to their only, long-term sexual partner, however, this is thought to be <1% per after 10 years. Your current sexual partner should get tested for hepatitis C. Long-term sexual partners do not need to change their sexual practices, however, use condoms during sex with a new partner. The risk of transmitting hepatitis C during pregnancy may depend upon the level of virus in your bloodstream. In general, the risk is about 5% (about 1 in 20) but is increased in people who are also infected with HIV.

Currently, there is **no vaccine available** to immunise individuals against this virus.

### What is the Natural History of Hepatitis C?

Chronic hepatitis C appears to be a slowly progressive disease that may gradually advance over 10-40 years.

20% of Hepatitis C infected patients clear the virus from the body within 6 months of acquiring it

80% of Hepatitis C infected patients have persistent virus indicating a chronic carrier state

For chronic carriers the following outcomes are likely over 20 years from the time of acquiring the virus:

- ◆ 20% of patients develop **NO significant liver disease** or fibrosis (scarring)
- ◆ 60% of patients develop **mild to moderate liver disease** variable fibrosis (scarring)
- ◆ 20% of patients develop **severe liver disease with cirrhosis** (scarring)

A liver biopsy is typically done prior to treatment to determine the severity of liver damage and provide confirmation of the underlying disease. This involves obtaining a tiny sample of the liver tissue under ultrasound control.

### Is There a Treatment for Chronic Hepatitis C?

Combination treatment of **PEGULATED interferon** injections and **Ribavirin** tablets for 6 or 12 months

Response rates depend on which strain of the Hepatitis C virus you have

- ◆ (Genotype) **strain 1** up to 50% respond
- ◆ (Genotype) **strains other than 1** have a better response rate, up to 70%

**Unfortunately overall about 50% respond and 50% relapse within 2 yr**

Side effects caused by interferon therapy are frequent and include "flu-like" symptoms, depression, headache, and decreased appetite. The "flu-like" symptoms can be minimised by taking two doses of panadol. In addition, interferon may depress immune system, increasing the risk of serious infections. Frequent blood tests are needed to monitor white blood cells, platelets and liver enzymes.



## Hepatitis C treatment side effects

### Interferon side effects

- **Flu like symptoms** - muscle aches and pains, fever, sweats, headaches after doses for up to 1 month
- **Headache**
- **Fatigue**
- **Low Platelets** (blood clotting factors)
- **Depression** - irritability, aggression, mood swings may occur. Treatment may be needed in some patients.
- **Nausea** - and loss of appetite may appear in the first month. Taste may change as well
- **Temporary partial hair loss or thinning** - gentle hair washing and brushing is essential
- **Thyroid abnormalities** - are seen in 2%. Treatment may be needed. These changes are fully reversible
- **Birth defects** - contraception is essential and pregnancy is not safe for 6 months after treatment finishes

### Ribavirin side effects

- **Birth defects** - contraception is essential and pregnancy is not safe for 6 months after treatment finishes
- **Semen (sperm) abnormalities** - makes fertilisation unsafe for men taking Ribavirin because of birth defects
- **Anemia** - a break down of some red cells occurs (haemolysis) which may cause symptoms in some people
- **Rashes** - seen in upto 10% of people. Skin creams and medication tend to control itch reasonably well
- **Nasal Congestion**
- **Gout**