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Hepatitis C

The following fact sheet information is from the Australian Society of HIV Medicine Inc.

For more information visit: www.ashm.org.au/publications/hepC-factsheet.

The information below is for people who have received a positive Hepatitis C antibody test result and for people who want to know more about Hepatitis C. A positive test result means that you have been exposed to the Hepatitis C virus. This may be a shock and you may have questions that you need answered.

One in four people exposed to Hepatitis C will clear the virus. Your doctor can order more tests to find out if you are one of these people. If further tests reveal that you do have active Hepatitis C, your doctor and the organisations listed here are able to provide further information and support.

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that can damage the liver. Hepatitis C can be a chronic (long term) condition. You may have had it for many years without experiencing any symptoms. However, common symptoms include fatigue, nausea, pain under the ribs and intolerance to fatty foods and alcohol. There are at least six major types of Hepatitis C called genotypes which are all slightly different. Unlike other Hepatitis viruses, Hepatitis C does not usually cause illness when you are first infected. Many people might not know that they have been infected, even after having the virus for many years.

How can you get Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact. Most people in Australia and New Zealand with Hepatitis C are infected through re-using drug-injecting equipment. Transmission can also occur through unsterile tattooing or body piercing, from a needlestick injury, or from blood, or blood product transfusion in Australia prior to 1990. Hepatitis C can also be spread by unsterile medical or vaccination practices in some countries. There is a small risk of mother-to-baby transmission through sharing household utensils such as cups or plates or through sharing food.

Treatment

Treatment aims to clear Hepatitis C from your body and minimise damage to your liver. Not everyone needs treatment as Hepatitis C is often mild and will not affect long-term health. The most effective treatment for Hepatitis C is a combination course of drugs pegylated interferon and ribavirin. Hepatitis C treatment has advanced rapidly in the past few years and around 80% of people with some genotypes and about 50 to 60% of all people treated with current therapy clear the virus. Some genotypes are more responsive to treatment than others. This means that many people with Hepatitis C can clear the virus and become symptom free. Interferon is injected just under the skin and ribavirin is taken as a pill. Treatment is usually given for 6 to 12 months. Regular check-ups by Dr White are essential during your treatment to monitor your progress and respond to any issues you may have.



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Monitoring Your Health

To find out how your body is coping with Hepatitis C, you need to monitor your health. This can help in deciding whether or when to start treatment. Regular monitoring of your health will involve consultation with your local GP and Dr White. It is most important to maintain a healthy diet, cut out or limit alcohol and exercise regularly. Once a person has been exposed to Hepatitis C, a Hepatitis C antibody test will usually come back positive, even after the body has cleared the virus or after successful treatment. Several tests are used to determine whether your Hepatitis C has been cleared or whether it is still active. If it is cleared, you are no longer infectious and the virus is no longer damaging your liver.

Tests

Liver function tests look at how your liver is performing. One of these tests is called an ALT test. It indicates current liver damage. It can go up and down over time for many reasons including alcohol use, other drug use or if your body is fighting another infection. It can also fluctuate as a result of Hepatitis C. If your ALT is raised on one or more occasions, your doctor may perform a PCR test to determine whether you have cleared the Hepatitis C virus or if it is still active. You may also have a genotype test, which is the type of the virus you have been exposed to, and a viral load test, which measures how much of the virus is in your system. The genotype and viral load tests give an indication of treatment outcome. A PCR test will be repeated sometime after treatment to determine whether you have cleared the Hepatitis C virus. Your doctor is a good person to talk to about Hepatitis C in a private and confidential manner.

Confidentiality

Under most circumstances, you have no obligation to tell anyone that you have Hepatitis C. However, there is a legal requirement to inform the Red Cross of your Hepatitis C status if you are donating blood, and similarly, you must indicate your Hepatitis C status to the Australian Defence Force if you are applying as an entrant. If you are a health care worker with Hepatitis C you must not perform exposure-prone procedures. You should tell doctors, dentists and blood collection nurses caring for you.

If you have Hepatitis C it is important to ask questions and find the kind of support that suits you. Hepatitis organisations offer a range of information and services including confidential counselling and referrals. They can often put you in contact with others who have Hepatitis C. You may want to do some more reading before talking to others. A list of helpful resources can be found at www.ashm.org.au/resources and at www.hepatitisc.org.au.

Australian Hepatitis Council

Tel: 02 6232 4257 (metro)

Help Line: 1300 301 383 (regional)

Web: www.acthepc.org