

HEPATITIS C

TRANSMISSION

Hepatitis C cannot be caught by hugging, or sharing plates, cutlery, toilets or washing machines.

Although HCV is rarely passed on sexually, all sexually active people need to consider safe sex due to the range of sexually transmissible diseases with which they can become infected. • There is a small chance the virus will be passed on to a baby during pregnancy or at birth. The risk is increased if the mother has only just become infected (or reinfected) or if she has serious liver damage.

HCV does

not seem to be passed on via breast milk.

SELF MANAGEMENT

People with hepatitis C can consider the following actions to improve their health:

1. stop drinking alcohol, or cut down alcohol intake
2. consider having hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.
3. eat a balanced diet
4. learn how to manage stress
5. seek counselling if needed
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7. when taking prescription or over-the-counter drugs, check with a doctor and follow the directions carefully

DESCRIPTION

'Hepatitis' means inflammation or swelling of the liver. It can be caused by chemicals or drugs, drinking too much alcohol, or by different kinds of viral infections. There are a number of different hepatitis viruses: A, B, C, D, E. They are all completely different; they cause different illnesses and may require different treatments.

WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is a liver inflammation caused by the hepatitis C virus. Before the virus was identified in 1989, hepatitis C was known as non-A/non-B hepatitis. Currently, there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.

HOW IS HEPATITIS C TRANSMITTED?

Hepatitis C is nearly always transmitted through blood-to-blood contact. This involves sharing of drug injecting equipment, unsafe tattooing or skin piercing, receiving blood transfusions prior to February 1990, needle-stick injuries, or unsterile medical procedures. Since February 1990, Australian blood banks have screened donated blood for hepatitis C

NEW RESEARCH

Is suggesting that hepatitis C is being transmitted by people living with HIV and Hepatitis C., It is thought that co infection of Hepatitis C and HIV results in a much higher Hepatitis C viral load that can be transmitted sexually.

HOW DOES HEPATITIS C AFFECT PEOPLE?

Of every 100 people exposed to HCV, approximately 25 will clear the virus within four to six weeks of infection. The other 75 will develop a chronic or ongoing infection. When people are first infected with hepatitis C, there is usually no sign of illness. Over a long period of time infection goes on to affect different people to varying degrees.

HEPATITIS C

SELF MANAGEMENT cont....

8. talk to someone close about feelings or problems

9. if injecting drugs, use safer injecting methods.

HOW CAN WE REDUCE THE TRANSMISSION OF HEP C?

- People living with Hepatitis C should not donate blood, sperm or organs.
- People who inject shouldn't share *any* injecting equipment, including needles and syringes, spoons, filters, water, swabs and tourniquets. Hands should be washed thoroughly before and after injecting. Ideally, people should use a new fit for every hit. Tables or benches should be wiped down before people prepare a hit. Used fits should be disposed of in a fitpack or sealed plastic container (for example, a juice bottle). Blood spills should be wiped up with absorbent paper towel and the spill site cleaned with detergent and water.
- Cuts and wounds should be covered with waterproof dressings (for example, band-aids).
- Body piercing and tattooing should be done at shops that use proper methods of sterilisation.
- Razors, toothbrushes or nail scissors shouldn't be shared.
- Safe sex practices



IS THERE A TEST FOR HEPATITIS C?

A blood test showing presence of antibodies to the virus is evidence of present or past infection. If a person tests positive for the antibodies to hepatitis C, and has a definite risk factor for exposure to blood and/or abnormal liver function tests, it is likely they have hepatitis C and are infectious. PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) tests can determine the presence of HCV in blood (the PCR viral detection test). PCR tests can also determine the amount of virus circulating in the blood (the PCR viral load test), and the HCV sub-type with which the person is infected (the PCR genotype test). Other blood tests, called liver function tests, may suggest if someone has any liver damage.

A liver biopsy—studying a tiny sample of liver tissue—is the only accurate way of telling whether the liver is damaged.

IS THERE TREATMENT AVAILABLE?

A person with hepatitis C has to meet certain conditions to receive government-funded treatments. The current first-line therapy for hepatitis C consists of pegylated interferon and ribavirin, available here in Australia, manufactured under the names "Pegatron" and "Pegasys RBV". Studies have shown that people are more likely to successfully respond to the combination of pegylated interferon injections and ribavirin tablets, than they would with standard combination therapy or interferon alone.

Combination treatment involves Interferon injections and Ribavirin tablets. To date, hepatitis C genotypes 2 and 3 have been shown to have a higher long-term response rate to combination therapy (up to 70 per cent) than genotypes 1 and 4 (up to 40 per cent). Overall, a person's chance of responding well to combination therapy is related to their hepatitis C genotype and the amount of virus in their blood.