

Hepatitis C

Information Leaflet

A patients perspective...

WHAT ABOUT CONTRACEPTION & PREGNANCY?

There is a small chance of catching Hep C through sexual intercourse, but it is best to use contraception to be on the safe side. Doctors are unsure whether the infection that occurs between partners is because of sexual exposure or because of other reasons. Hep C does not rule out having children, there is a 5% chance of the mother transmitting the virus to her baby if she is Hep C positive. You must consider safe contraception to prevent pregnancy during and up to 1 year after treatment as it can be harmful to the unborn baby. The risk of transmitting the virus through breastfeeding is very low, but mother's need to be aware of cracked or bleeding nipples which will expose the baby to infected blood.

INFORMING FAMILY AND FRIENDS?

The hardest thing is finding out you have Hep C, and then having to tell those close to you i.e. family or friends. It is also best to tell your partner so they can be tested for the virus and let them know any information they may need to know about the Hep C virus. Don't keep it to yourself, you may put other people at risk if they are close to you i.e. sharing a house with you. Also inform your dentist or anyone who comes into contact with your blood.

LIVER BIOPSY

The only way to assess the amount of liver damage is a liver biopsy. The biopsy involves taking a small sample of liver tissue for examination under a microscope. The test is usually performed under local anaesthetic. A hollow fine needle is passed through the skin into the liver and a small piece of tissue is withdrawn inside the needle. People may find this uncomfortable. In many hospitals the procedure is performed as a day case, in others an overnight stay is necessary. The results of the biopsy are graded and staged according to the degree of inflammation and scarring.

WHERE CAN I TURN TO FOR ADVICE?

Your GP will refer you to a hospital based Hep C specialist and they will advise you on both the treatment and Hep C. They will also give you some information leaflets about Hep C.

Your local drug and alcohol team also provide help and information leaflets on Hep C.

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

FOCUS GATESHEAD DRUG & ALCOHOL TEAM:

0191 4788432

0191 4788433

0191 4788434

HARM REDUCTION TEAM

0191 4901709

SEXUAL HEALTH PROMOTION TEAM

0191 4901699

GENITO URINARY MEDICINE CLINICS (GUM)

0191 2195013/5011

This leaflet was written by John Hogarth, a member of FOCUS, Gateshead Drug & Alcohol Service User Forum, and assisted by TWENTY FOUR :7's Harm Reduction Team

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MY STORY ...

I started to take drugs when I was 13 years old and like all drug users I always said I would never do hard drugs, but by the time I was 25 years old I had took every drug you can get. I also had loads of tattoo's and body piercing done, all back street jobs because it was cheaper. Even though I'd done all this I didn't think I would catch anything, but in 2002 I was tested for Hepatitis A,B,C and HIV, it came back that I was Hepatitis C positive. I was really worried about telling my family but everyone was so supportive.

I was then told I had to be clean of all drugs for six months before I would be considered for any treatment. Those six month were hard, but I did it, and I got put onto my treatment. Once you start treatment you have to attend lots of hospital appointments for weight checks, blood samples and to get your medication, which you can only get from the hospital pharmacy. I had to take a combination treatment which was Ribavirin 200mg taken orally twice a day (three on the morning and two on the evening) and pegylated Interferon injected once a week. It would have been so easy to give up treatment because sometimes I felt really bad and didn't want to get out of bed or do anything, but with the support of my family and my Hep C support worker I kept going. I'm so glad I did because it is now 2005 and I have finished all my treatment and got married. I have had one negative blood test, I just need two more and that will mean I have beaten Hep C and no longer carry the virus. I also do voluntary work for FOCUS, Gateshead Drug & Alcohol Service User Forum and I am starting a Hep C support group starting spring 2005.

All in my life is good right now and looking back I would never have thought I could be where I am now, but with the support of friends and loved ones and a 100% dedication, there's no limit to what you can achieve whatever your goal may be.

JOHN HOGARTH, 2005

WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C, also known as 'HCV', is a blood borne viral disease that causes inflammation of the liver which may lead to severe liver damage. It was formally identified in 1989.

WHY IS HEP C DIFFERENT FROM A-G?

A+B can be prevented by immunisation unlike C+E (abroad). Hepatitis C is more likely to progress to chronic disease.

HOW CAN HEPATITIS C BE CAUGHT?

From blood transfusions before 1991 or blood products before 1986 (e.g. clotting factor). Hepatitis C is more common and easier to catch than you might think. It can be passed on through blood to blood contact and through sharing injecting materials. From the needle to the cup you use for the water and sharing cocaine straws - bank-notes - crack pipes - if you and the people you are sharing with have chapped lips - un-sterilised tattoo and piercing equipment - sharing toiletries like toothbrushes, razors, nail-clippers, nail-brush, scissors etc. In some cases doctors do not know how people become infected. Hep C cannot be caught through kissing, hugging and sharing cutlery.

HOW DO I GET TESTED?

Go to your G.P. or the Harm Reduction Service and ask for a blood test to see if you have Hep C, you may also be tested for A and B, HIV. if you have Hep C further tests may be necessary to determine any damage there may be to the liver. You may be given a Hep B vaccine +3 followed later by a Hep B booster vaccine.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A lot of people show no symptoms at all for many years, but you may suffer from tiredness, flu-like symptoms, weight-loss, loss of appetite, alcohol intolerance, jaundice, concentration problems (brain-fog), mild to severe fatigue, anxiety and pain in the area of the liver.

CAN HEPATITIS C BE TREATED?

Hepatitis C can be treated with a combination of two drugs, pegylated interferon and Ribavirin, this is known as combination therapy. Interferon is an injection and Ribavirin is taken orally. The treatment varies from one person to another, treatment may last between 24-48 weeks. Only people with moderate to severe hepatitis will be considered for treatment and those with significant symptoms. The treatment is about 50% effective for people with genotype 1, and 80% with genotypes 2 and 3. There is no vaccine for Hep C as there is for A and B. The earlier Hep C is diagnosed, the better the chance of the treatment working. Some people may fight off Hep C naturally as interferon occurs in your immune system to combat viral infections.

DOES IT ALWAYS LEAD TO CIRRHOSIS AND/OR CANCER?

Hep C can lead to very serious liver disease, but not in all cases. Some research has shown that out of 100 people exposed to Hepatitis C approximately :-

80 people may develop chronic Hepatitis C

20 people could clear the virus within 2-6 months

20 people never develop liver damage or physical symptoms

60 people will develop some level of long-term symptoms or signs of liver inflammation

16 people will develop Cirrhosis of the liver over a 20 years period

1-2 people with cirrhosis may develop liver cancer after a further period

MEDICATION

When buying over the counter medication you should always read the label and contents as some medications are unsuitable for people with liver problems and should be avoided at all times.

ALCOHOL

You should try cutting down or stopping all together as it can cause your liver a lot more damage. You can get help to stop from AA, drug and alcohol team or harm reduction team.