



## HEPATITIS C

### The Issue

Hepatitis C is an infectious virus that is carried in the blood and affects approximately 240,000 Canadians. The number of people with hepatitis C is increasing rapidly in Canada and around the world, primarily among those sharing needles and other drug equipment.

### Background

Although the hepatitis C virus (HCV) has existed for a long time, it was only identified in 1989. HCV causes inflammation of the liver, which can progress to cirrhosis (extensive scarring that can inhibit the normal function of the liver).

Of the more 5,000 newly infected people each year, up to 70 percent experience no symptoms. For some, symptoms may not show up for 20 or 30 years. In the meantime, these people may unknowingly infect others. That is why it is important to know if you are at risk and how to take preventative action.

### Health Risks of Hepatitis C

Like HIV and other viruses, HCV is spread through contact with infected blood. The most common ways of being infected with the HCV virus are by:

- Sharing needles, straws, pipes, spoons and other drug-related equipment. About two-thirds of new HCV infections each year are related to drug use. Cleaning equipment with bleach does not always effectively kill the virus
- Getting a tattoo, body piercing or acupuncture from an operator who does not use sterilized equipment or techniques
- Being born to a mother with hepatitis C
- Getting pierced by a needle or sharp equipment that has infected blood on it, as in a workplace situation

People who had blood transfusions before the testing of blood donations became universal in 1992, may also be at risk. While the risk is low, it is also possible to become infected by sharing personal household articles such as a razor or toothbrush with an infected person. The risk of transmission of HCV during sex is also low. However, having multiple sexual partners may increase the risk.

## The Health Effects of Hepatitis C

HCV affects the liver, an essential organ that acts as a filter for chemicals and toxins that enter the body. The liver also helps digest food, stores vitamins and minerals, and aids in manufacturing blood.

The illness begins with flu-like symptoms such as fatigue, fever, body aches and pains, and perhaps nausea or vomiting. Urine might become dark brown and in severe infections, the skin and eyes may turn yellow (become jaundiced). Approximately 15 to 20 percent of people infected recover from the infection.

However, the majority progress to chronic infection. The course of the disease in the chronic phase is slow and may last a lifetime. Up to 20 percent of those infected develop cirrhosis, which severely damages the liver. A smaller percentage develop liver cancer.

Currently, there is no vaccine or cure for HCV. Treatment usually involves a combination of the drugs interferon and ribavirin. If you think you may be at risk for hepatitis C, see your doctor. The disease can be detected by a simple blood test, and there are steps and medications you can take to minimize the effects of the disease.

## Minimizing Your Risk

HCV infection can be prevented by following these steps:

- Never share needles or any other drug equipment
- Wear latex gloves if you are likely to be in contact with someone else's blood
- If you have sex with more than one partner, always use a condom
- If you are getting a tattoo, body piercing or acupuncture, choose a reputable licensed person and ensure all equipment is sterile. Do not allow anyone to use homemade or reused equipment, including needles, ink or jewellery

## How The Government of Canada is Taking Action on Hepatitis C

In 1998, the Government of Canada established the Hepatitis C Prevention, Support and Research Program. This program's aims are to help prevent hepatitis C infection, support those living with the disease, support research on treatment and increase awareness of the risks.

## Need More Info?

To learn more about the details of the Hep C program, visit the web site at:

[http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/hepatitis\\_c/commpro1999.html](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/hepatitis_c/commpro1999.html)

Or for more information on Hep C search our Web site at:

<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/english/index.html>