

Hepatitis C 101

- **What is Hepatitis?**

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. It can be caused by a virus, fat in the liver, alcohol or drugs. Hepatitis that is caused by a virus is viral hepatitis. It is carried in the blood and attacks the liver causing inflammation.
- **What is Hepatitis C?**

Hepatitis C is a virus that attacks the liver.
- **How many types of virus exist?**

There are at least nine genotypes of the hepatitis C virus but genotype 1 is the most common in Canada. The differences in genotype are not associated with differences in disease severity, but are associated with different sensitivity to current treatment.
- **How is it spread?**

The hepatitis C virus is spread by direct blood to blood contact.
- **How many people have it?**

It is estimated that between 240,000 and 300,000 people are living with Hepatitis C in Canada.
- **How do you prevent it?**

There is no vaccination for hepatitis C. Do not share needles, works, or inhalation equipment (pipes). Ensure all procedures (tattooing, piercing) are done with equipment that is new or properly sterilized. Practice safer sex.
- **What are the symptoms?**

Hepatitis C usually progresses slowly and affects people differently. The vast majority of patients with hepatitis C have no symptoms. There are often no symptoms for many years or symptoms may be very general and feel like other illnesses. You can, however, experience flu-like symptoms, such as: fatigue, loss of appetite, weakness, abdominal pain and jaundice.
- **Do I really need treatment?**

Some people (about 20%) spontaneously clear the hepatitis C virus. The rest develop chronic hepatitis C, which can lead to cirrhosis, liver cancer and other serious medical complications. For example, liver failure due to hepatitis C infection is the most frequent indication for liver transplant.
- **Is there any treatment?**

Yes. Hepatitis C is treated with a combination of anti-viral drugs, including a weekly injection and multiple pills that must be taken daily. This treatment usually takes between 6 and 12 months but it depends mainly on the viral genotype and how damaged the liver is.
- **Does the treatment have side effects?**

Yes, it may produce debilitating side effects in some people, ranging from fatigue to depression, itchiness, inability to concentrate and a myriad of other symptoms.
- **Can it be cured?**

Someone is cured of the Hepatitis C if the virus is no longer detectable in their blood six months after they have completed treatment. Hepatitis C anti-bodies will always be present. Once cured, an individual can no longer pass on the virus; however, it does not make them immune. Infection with Hepatitis C may occur again if someone is re-exposed.
- **How will Hepatitis C affect my life?**

Adopt a healthier lifestyle, protect others, tell others, build a support network, move on with your life.
- **How can you help someone with Hepatitis C?**

Refer them to their health care provider. Do not judge. Be empathetic. Be patient.