

# Hepatitis C (HCV) – Counselling Guidelines for Health Care Professionals (HCP)

Hepatitis C (HCV) counselling is an ongoing process that gives professionals an opportunity to provide patients with information about HCV disease, address risk behaviors and provide education to reduce transmission to others.

- **Ongoing Care:** The importance of having a medical practitioner for ongoing care and assessment of liver function must be stressed. Up to 80% of patients who test positive for HCV go on to develop chronic HCV. Most people will have no symptoms and do not feel sick even though they are infected.
- **Other Blood Tests:** Discuss the need for further blood work, only a HCV-RNA (PCR) test can confirm active virus. If active virus is present, HCV viral load and genotype will be completed. Other testing should include liver enzymes, hepatitis A & B and HIV.
- **Vaccines:** All persons diagnosed with Hepatitis C are eligible for publicly funded Hep A, Hep B and Pneumococcal 23 vaccinations at no cost to the patient. The combined Hep A and Hep B vaccine (TWINRIX) is not publicly funded. Please call the Thunder Bay District Health Unit at 625-8810 to order the vaccine for your office, or your patient can call the Health Unit at 625-5900 to schedule an immunization appointment.
- **Alcohol:** Drinking alcohol combined with chronic viral hepatitis can impair regeneration and promote fibrosis. HCV patients have double the risk of getting cirrhosis if they drink alcohol. Ideally, patients should avoid alcohol if possible.
- **Tobacco:** Smoking increases the risk of liver cancer if you have HCV.
- **Medications:** Patients should discuss all over the counter medications, prescribed medication and herbal treatment with their medical practitioner as they could be toxic to the liver.
- **Injection Equipment:** Individuals who use intravenous drugs should be advised **not to share any injection equipment (including needles, syringes, water, cooker, spoons and cotton)**, but there is also a risk through sharing supplies for smoking and snorting drugs like crack pipes or cocaine straws. Injection equipment should be disposed of carefully. Sharps must be placed in a hard plastic shell container (like a bleach bottle) or a metal tin can with a tight fitting lid. Lids can be reinforced with tape. For sharps containers and harm reduction supplies contact Superior Points at (807) 625-8831.
- **Tattooing/Body Piercing:** Only sterile or new equipment should be used each time. Ink pots should be for single use only and should not be shared by others.
- **Sexual Transmission:** Individuals with multiple sexual partners should be counselled about **safer sex** practices and advised to inform potential sexual partners that there is a small risk of transmission of hepatitis C (see fact sheet). Contact tracing of past sexual partners is not currently recommended. **Safer sex** means not having sex or always using condoms during anal and vaginal sex and using a condom or barrier during oral sex. The prevalence among long term sexual partners with continuing sexual exposure is relatively low (<5%). Individuals should be encouraged to discuss this issue with their partner and the partner should consider testing for hepatitis C. The risk increases in men who have sex with men and in individuals who have multiple sex partners.

- **Perinatal Transmission:** There is evidence that 3 to 7% of pregnant women with Hepatitis C will transmit the infection to the baby in utero. Testing for Hepatitis RNA should take place on two occasions; between the ages of 2 & 6 months and again at 18 months (after maternal antibody is likely to have cleared). HCV positive infants should be referred to a pediatrician.
- **Breast Feeding:** There is no evidence of HCV transmission through breastfeeding. Women should refrain from breastfeeding if nipples are cracked and bleeding.
- **Household Transmission:** Any **open wounds** should be covered until healed. Individuals should be counseled not to share personal hygiene items that may be contaminated by blood, such as razor blades, nail clippers, scissors, and toothbrushes. Use bleach to clean up blood spills. Surfaces should be soaked with one part bleach to nine parts water and left for 10 minutes before wiping off. It is not necessary to avoid close contact with family members or to avoid sharing meals or serving utensils.
- **Blood Donations:** HCV positive individuals should **not donate blood**, organs, tissue, semen or breast milk. They should also be asked if they have donated blood since they became infected or if they received a blood transfusion in the past.
- **HCV Status:** Patients should be encouraged to share information on their HCV status with health care workers who may come in contact with their blood (e.g. dentists).
- **Treatment:** Hepatitis C can be cured. Getting treatment will minimize damage to the liver, lower the chances of developing liver cancer and lower the likelihood of Hep C being passed from one person to another. There are newer medications now available in Canada with fewer side effects, shorter treatment time (8 to 24 weeks) and a higher cure rate.
- **Patient Resources:** You may wish to make your client aware of local resources through Elevate NWO (345-1516 or toll free at 1-800-488-5840). Resource materials are also available from the Canadian Liver Foundation (1-800-563-5483), [www.liver.ca](http://www.liver.ca) or CATIE (1-800-263-1638), [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)
- **Compensation Programs:** If infected with HCV for the first time through a blood transfusion before 1986 or after July 1, 1990, phone 1-866-344-3361. If infected with HCV for the first time between the period January 1, 1986 to July 1, 1990 phone 1-866-434-0944.

#### REFERENCES

1. Tom Wong and Samuel S. Lee: Hepatitis C – A Review for Primary Care Physicians; Can. Med Assoc. 2006; 174(5)
2. Recommendations for the Public Health Response to Hepatitis C, PIDAC July 2014

**For further information contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318  
or toll free 1-888-294-6630, ext. 8318.**