Counselling Guideline – Hepatitis C

- **Ways to Stay Healthy with Viral Hepatitis:**
  Discuss avoiding or limiting tobacco use, as smoking increases the risk of liver cancer if a person has hepatitis C. Assess smoking status and provide brief tobacco cessation intervention to all clients. Healthy eating can also help keep the liver healthy. The guidelines in Eating Well with Canada’s Food guide can provide guidance. Individuals should also be counselled to avoid illness, reduce stress, to be active and to get adequate sleep. As well, individuals should talk to their health care provider before taking any medicine, to be sure that it is safe for them to take.

- **Other Blood Tests:**
  Discuss the need for further blood work such as HCV-RNA testing to check for active virus. If active virus is present, HCV viral load and HCV genotype testing will also be completed in preparation for possible treatment. Other blood work could include liver enzymes, hepatitis A, B, and HIV testing.

- **Hepatitis A & B Vaccines:**
  Hepatitis A and hepatitis B vaccinations are recommended for all HCV-positive individuals and are provided free of charge. The combined hepatitis A and B vaccine (Twinrix™) is not publicly funded.

- **Alcohol:**
  Excessive alcohol intake can increase damage to the liver and will make Hepatitis treatment less effective. Ideally the individual should avoid alcohol.

- **Household Transmission:**
  Individuals should be counselled to not share personal care items such as toothbrushes, scissors, razors or nail clippers that could be contaminated with blood. Sores or breaks in skin should also be covered. Hepatitis C is NOT spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing or shaking hands or by being around someone who is sneezing or coughing. The hepatitis C virus is not found in food or water.

- **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 risk of infection. Contact tracing of past sexual partners is not currently recommended. The risk of sexual transmission is increased by sexual practices involving trauma, menstrual blood, or anal intercourse. Safer sex means not having sex or always using condoms during anal and vaginal sex, and using a condom or barrier during oral sex.

  In monogamous long-term relationships, transmission is rare. Counsel Individuals about their risk and offer HCV testing with consent.

- **Perinatal Transmission:**
  Pregnancy is not contraindicated in HCV-infected individuals. Women with HCV can have healthy pregnancies and healthy babies. The risk of perinatal transmission is approximately 5%, and increases if the viral load is high. Passive maternal antibody may persist for up to 18 months. Testing for anti-HCV for infants therefore, should not be performed until 18 months of age. If earlier diagnosis is desired due to significant parental anxiety or concern about losing infant to follow up, HCV RNA may be performed at a minimum of 2 months of age, but does require venipuncture to obtain 2.5 ml of blood (preferable to have maternal RNA, because if negative, baby would not be infected). Women should be advised to consider breastfeeding if there are no other contraindications, however, if the woman’s nipples are cracked or bleeding, breastfeeding should be avoided until they are healed.
Injection and Drug Equipment/Needle Syringe Program:
Individuals should be educated about the risks of sharing needles, syringes or other drug paraphernalia such as spoons, straws, filters or cookers. Injection equipment should not be disposed of in municipal garbage. Sharps containers and harm reduction supplies are available through the Smart Works Needle Syringe Program at all of the health unit office locations. For more information, call the Brockville office at 613-345-5685 or the Smiths Falls office at 613-283-2740.

Blood Donations/Transfusions:
HCV-positive individuals should be told not to donate blood, organs, tissues, or semen. They should also be asked about donations since they became infected and if they received blood or blood products as a possible source of infection. All relevant information will be reported to the Canadian Blood Services.

Duty to Disclose:
Under Canadian criminal law, clients need to understand that criminal charges could be laid against them if they know they have tested positive for hepatitis C and expose someone else to a “significant risk” of infection. Courts have not clearly decided if individuals must disclose their positive status before engaging in any activity that could transmit the virus, however disclosure beforehand may be the best way to avoid prosecution.

Resources:
Individuals can access current information on hepatitis C on the Leeds, Grenville and Lanark District Health Unit’s website at http://www.healthunit.org/infectious/hepc.html. Information can also be mailed to the client at his/her request.

References
1. “Healthy Living with Viral Hepatitis,” Canadian Liver Foundation, March 2010