

# HEPATITIS C

## Counselling Guidelines:

### **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 B or hepatitis C. The liver processes everything we eat, so healthy eating can 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, 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.<sup>6</sup>

### **Other Blood Tests:**

Discuss 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 combined with chronic viral hepatitis C can impair liver regeneration and promote fibrosis. 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.<sup>2</sup>

### **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.<sup>1</sup> 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. After 20 years in a long-term sexual relationship with someone who is infected with HCV, the risk of infection is about 2.5%. Individuals should be encouraged to discuss this issue with their partner. The partner should be counselled about their risk and should be offered a test for HCV with their consent.

### **Perinatal Transmission:**

Pregnancy is not contraindicated in HCV-infected individuals. The risk of perinatal transmission averages 5% to 6% and transmission occurs only from women who are HCV RNA positive at the time of delivery. All people with HCV-RNA in their blood are considered to be infectious. Passive maternal antibody can be present in infants for as long as 18 months.

Testing for anti-HCV for infants therefore, should not be performed until after 18 months of age. If earlier diagnosis is desired, HCV RNA may be performed at or after the infant's first well-child visit at 1 to 2 months of age,<sup>3</sup> but does require venipuncture to obtain 2.5 ml of blood (preferable to have maternal RNA, because if negative, baby would not be infected). At this time there is no evidence that breast-feeding transmits HCV from mother to baby, although, breast-feeding should be avoided if the mother's nipples are bleeding or cracked.

**Injection and Drug Equipment/Needle Exchange Program:**

Individuals should be told not to share needles, syringes or other drug paraphernalia such as spoons, straws, filters or cookers. Injection equipment should be disposed of carefully. Sharps must be placed in a hard plastic shell container or metal tin can with a tight fitting, puncture proof lid. Injection equipment should not be disposed of in municipal garbage. The Clean Works, Needle Exchange Program is available at all of the Health Unit office locations. For more information call Brockville at 613 345-5685 or Smiths Falls 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 defined in law what counts as a "significant risk". A person can protect him/herself by: clearly disclosing his or her positive status before engaging in any activity that could transmit the infection; not sharing needles or other drug-use equipment; avoiding sex that is considered 'high risk'; advising health care provider(s) of his or her positive status.<sup>4,5</sup>

**Resources:**

Individuals can access current information on Hepatitis C on the Leeds Grenville & Lanark District Health Unit's website @ <http://www.healthunit.org/infectious/hepc.html> Information can also be mailed to the client at his/her request.

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Signature

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Date

**References:**

1. MOHLTC, Assessment Guide for Hepatitis C Risk Factors, March, 2007 [www.hepContario.ca](http://www.hepContario.ca)
2. Public Health Agency of Canada, Hepatitis C get the facts, 2009 [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hepc/index\\_e.html](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/hepc/index_e.html)
3. Red Book , Hepatitis C –2009 (1):357 <http://aapredbook.aappublications.org>
4. Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network , Criminal Law and HIV, five info sheets on the criminalization of HIV exposure in Canada, March 2008 [www.aidslaw.ca/criminallaw](http://www.aidslaw.ca/criminallaw)
5. Ontario Working Group on Criminal Law and HIV Exposure, Q&A about the Campaign for Ontario Guidelines for Criminal Prosecutions of HIV Non-disclosure, 2010 [www.ontarioaidsnetwork.on.ca/clhe](http://www.ontarioaidsnetwork.on.ca/clhe)
6. Canadian Liver Foundation, Healthy Living with Viral Hepatitis, March 2010 [www.liver.ca](http://www.liver.ca)