

Hepatitis C

Information for patients

This leaflet answers common questions about hepatitis C. If you would like further information, or have any worries, please do not hesitate to ask your nurse or doctor (see contact details below).

In all cases, a doctor or a nurse will explain the treatment options for hepatitis C to you and answer any questions you may have. In most cases it will be possible for a friend or relative to accompany you for all or part of the appointment. Please ask your nurse or doctor.

What is hepatitis C?

The hepatitis C virus (also known as HCV and Hep C) is carried by the blood and mainly infects the cells of the liver. The virus can sometimes cause inflammation of the liver (hepatitis) and damage to the liver.

Hepatitis C is an infectious disease meaning it can be caught from or transmitted to other people. Once the infection has lasted longer than six months it becomes known as chronic (long-term) hepatitis C. This means that the body can't clear the virus by itself, and the liver will become damaged.

HCV is now easily cured with well-tolerated oral medications.

How do people get infected by hepatitis C?

Many people do not know or may not ever know how they became infected. These are some of the ways you can become infected:

Exposure to poorly sterilised medical equipment or contaminated blood products.

Sharing injecting equipment such as needles and syringes with an infected person.

Being tattooed or pierced with unsterilized tools that were used for an infected person.

Through sharing personal care items, such as toothbrush or razor, which may have come into contact with an infected person's blood.

You cannot get hepatitis C from kissing or hugging an infected person or sharing cutlery as hepatitis C is spread through infected blood

How will hepatitis C affect my health?

Hep C is often called a 'silent disease' because most people infected with it do not have any symptoms until the virus causes liver damage. Symptoms of the virus include itching and tiredness. Symptoms of liver disease can include yellowish eyes and skin (jaundice), bruising easily, swelling of the ankles and abdomen, and fatigue.

What is cirrhosis of the liver?

Liver damage kills cells in the liver, and so the liver starts to lose the ability to work properly. If left untreated, the dead and dying liver cells are replaced by scar tissue called fibrosis. This can lead to cirrhosis, which is a serious liver condition. However, the hepatitis C virus can now be easily cleared from the body by treatment which then allows the fibrosis to improve.

How can I be tested for hepatitis C?

A blood test is required to confirm infection and determine the type (genotype) of hepatitis C infection. This is important to determine the best treatment.

Can hepatitis C be cured?

Hepatitis C was previously difficult to cure and required injections with many side effects. A breakthrough in available treatments has occurred in the last three years. Now, hepatitis C can be cured with a course of tablets which need to be taken for two to three months, and cures more than 95 per cent of patients. These treatments have fewer side effects than a typical course of antibiotics. A separate sheet will be provided to you about this.

Do you have any further questions?

If you have further questions, please contact the viral hepatitis nursing team using the contact details below:

Phone: 07960 860 995 (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm, or leave a voicemail message if you do not receive a response).

Email: RF-TR.RF-ViralHepatologyCNS@nhs.net

Barnet Hospital and Chase Farm Hospital

Telephone: 020 7794 0500, extension 65487.

Royal Free Hospital

Telephone: 020 7794 0500, extension 36166.

Other useful contacts

Hepatitis C Trust

The Hepatitis C Trust is a national UK charity. It provides information about hepatitis C and support services available.

Website: www.hepctrust.org.uk/

Address: 27 Crosby Row, London, SE1 3YD.

Telephone: 020 7089 6220

Confidential helpline: 020 7089 6221

British Liver Trust

The British Liver Trust has good information about hepatitis C in many other languages.

Website: www.britishlivertrust.org.uk

Address: British Liver Trust, 6 Dean Park Crescent, Bournemouth, BH1 1HL

More information

For more information about liver services at the Royal Free London, please visit our website: www.royalfree.nhs.uk/services/services-a-z/liver-services

Your feedback

If you have any feedback on this leaflet or for a list of references for it, please email: rf.communications@nhs.net.

Alternative formats

This leaflet is also available in large print. If you need this leaflet in another format – for example Braille, a language other than English or audio – please speak to a member of staff.

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