



Understanding Hepatitis C

***H*epatitis C**, also called HCV, is a widespread liver disease caused by a virus. Many persons entering methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) programs are infected.

If you are concerned that you may have this infection, or if you already have it, this brochure explains what hepatitis C is and steps you can take.

Who gets hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is the most common blood-borne infection in the United States. Many more people are infected with this virus than the AIDS-causing virus, HIV.

Hepatitis C is very common among drug-dependent persons. In some MMT programs, 8 out of 10, or more, persons in treatment test positive for the virus.

A test for the presence of hepatitis C virus has only existed since the early 1990s. Because the virus can remain dormant in the liver for 10, 20, or more years, it is possible to have been infected long ago and not know it. In fact, few hepatitis C carriers know they are infected and some may not become ill from it, yet they can spread the disease to others.

Is this a serious illness?

The hepatitis C virus produces inflammation that destroys liver cells and reduces liver function. Over time, scarring (called cirrhosis), cancer, and failure of the liver may develop.

Liver failure due to persistent, chronic hepatitis C is the leading reason for liver transplants in the U.S. However, there is a shortage of donated organs and it can be difficult for former drug-dependent persons to be accepted into liver transplant programs.

If you need a liver transplant, your MMT clinic staff and other organizations may be able to offer advice. Seek their help.

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis C is spread by direct contact with the blood of an infected person, most often by sharing drug injecting equipment (even just once). Other ways include:

- sharing drug snorting gear (such as cocaine straws)
- tattooing or body piercing (with contaminated needles)
- sharing personal items, such as a razor, with an infected person
- blood transfusions (before 1992).

More rarely, the virus can be spread from an infected pregnant woman to her child before or during birth. In some cases the source of the infection is unknown.

Is hepatitis easy to detect?

It can take many years before there are any noticeable indications of hepatitis C infection. However, some people may experience flu-like symptoms, especially during the early, acute stage:

- fatigue and a general ill feeling
- nausea and loss of appetite
- unintended weight loss
- vague abdominal pain or swelling.

Those conditions may be mistaken for other illnesses, or they can be due to other hepatitis viruses, such as types A or B. Fortunately, there are medical tests to detect the presence of active hepatitis virus or whether there was infection in the past, and how much liver damage has been done.

Are there treatments?

A small proportion of infected persons are able to fight off the virus and recover on their own. However, almost all of those infected carry the virus for life. Your health must be regularly monitored so any worsening of liver function can be detected early.

Although there is no vaccine or cure for hepatitis C at present, it can be treated if detected before there is serious liver damage. There are antiviral medicines that help reduce inflammation and improve liver function in many, but not all, persons. And, new treatments are being investigated.

Some of the medicines may produce undesirable side effects. It is important to follow your doctor's instructions and report any difficulties with the medications.

Methadone does not harm the liver and will not make hepatitis C worse. In fact, the healthier lifestyle and avoidance of harmful drugs made possible by MMT help protect the liver from further damage and can prolong life.

What can you do?

If you may have been exposed to hepatitis C, ask to be tested. If you have the infection, here are some suggestions:

- **Be very careful not to infect other persons and always practice safe sex (using latex condoms).**
- **Using or injecting illicit drugs, or drinking any alcohol, can make hepatitis C much worse, leading to more rapid loss of liver function.**
- **Never stop taking hepatitis C medications or change the dose without first talking to your doctor.**
- **Ask about vaccinations against hepatitis A and B to prevent the added damage those infections can cause the liver.**
- **Inform other healthcare providers of your hepatitis C status, so medications that might stress your liver can be avoided.**

Hepatitis C is not necessarily an immediate death sentence. With proper medical care and following the healthful lifestyle recommended by MMT clinic staff, most infected persons may lead normal lives for many years.

For further information on addiction and recovery issues, visit the *Addiction Treatment Forum* website at www.atforum.com.

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