

“Demonstration Project of HCV Rapid Testing in HIV Testing Setting”

Attachment 3b. Fact Sheet – Living with Chronic Hepatitis C

What is chronic Hepatitis C?

Chronic Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that results from a long-term infection with the Hepatitis C virus (HCV). Chronic Hepatitis C can lead to serious health problems including liver damage, liver failure, or liver cancer. Over time, approximately 60%-70% of people with chronic Hepatitis C develop liver disease and 1%-5% of people get liver cancer or cirrhosis.

Side Bar:

How does a person know if he or she has chronic Hepatitis C?

Two different types of blood tests are needed to tell if a person has Hepatitis C. A person first gets a test that looks for “antibodies” to the Hepatitis C virus. Antibodies are released into the bloodstream when a person becomes infected. If a person has a positive test for Hepatitis C antibodies, he or she must have a confirmatory test. This test looks for the presence of the Hepatitis C virus. When the confirmatory test is positive, this means a person currently has the virus in his or her blood.

If you have been told that you have chronic Hepatitis C, it is important to discuss with your doctor:

- Your past or current risks
- The results of the two tests
- What to do next

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

Most people with chronic Hepatitis C do not have any symptoms. Whether or not you show symptoms depends on many factors, such as how long you have had the virus and any other health conditions you have. Symptoms of chronic Hepatitis C can take up to 30 years to develop. When symptoms do appear, they can be a sign of serious liver problems. If and when you experience symptoms, they can include: fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dark urine, grey-colored bowel movements, joint pain, and jaundice.

What if I don't feel sick?

People with Hepatitis C often do not feel sick for many years. As a result, people could be living with Hepatitis C and appear healthy while liver damage silently occurs. Whether or not you have symptoms, the virus can be spread to others.

Why do I need to go to a doctor?

Your doctor will evaluate your overall health and may do additional tests to check your liver. There are several different tests your doctor may order:

- Liver function tests, also called a liver panel, to tell how well your liver is working. One of the most common tests is called ALT. The ALT levels are often, but not always, higher in people with hepatitis
- An ultrasound exam to create a visual image of your liver

- A liver biopsy, which is removal of a tiny bit of your liver, to allow your doctor to look directly at the health of the liver
- A genotype test which determines the type of Hepatitis C virus you have
- A viral load test which determines how much virus you have in your body

How is chronic Hepatitis C treated?

Medications, called antivirals, can be used to treat many people with chronic Hepatitis C. However, not everyone needs or can benefit from treatment. It is important to be checked by a doctor experienced in treating chronic Hepatitis C. He or she can determine the most appropriate medical care. Decisions about starting antiviral treatment are based on many factors, such as the type of virus, the condition of the liver, and other health conditions. Whether or not to be treated or when to start treatment should be discussed with your doctor.

What is treatment like?

Current treatment typically involves taking combinations of different antiviral medications for 6 to 12 months. These medications help your body to fight the Hepatitis C virus. Treatment can cause side effects such as flu-like symptoms, depression, weight loss, rash, anemia, and insomnia. Sometimes side effects can disrupt a person's life and day-to-day activities. Even though side effects are common, many can be managed with the help of your doctor. Some people may stop treatment because of side effects. Never change your dosage or stop taking medication without talking to your doctor. New medications are available that may increase the number of people who get rid of the virus and may reduce the length of treatment.

What about alternative treatments?

You may have heard about some "natural," herbal, or other products that are sold as treatments or cures for Hepatitis C. There is no herbal supplement or vitamin which has been proven safe and effective for treating Hepatitis C. Some herbal products are actually dangerous for your liver. Just because something is promoted as "natural" does not mean that it is safe to take. Always talk to your doctor before you try any alternative treatment.

Can Hepatitis C be cured?

For many people with Hepatitis C, medical treatment can be successful and can result in the virus no longer being detected in the blood. This is referred to as a sustained viral response, or SVR.

After treatment, is a person protected from Hepatitis C?

No. A person who has been successfully treated and has an SVR is not protected for life from Hepatitis C. A person can get infected with Hepatitis C again if he or she is exposed to blood infected with Hepatitis C virus.

What else can I do to protect my liver?

You can:

- Ask your doctor before taking any prescription, over-the-counter medications, supplements or vitamins. For instance, some drugs, such as certain pain medications, can potentially damage the liver
 - Avoid alcohol since it can increase the speed of liver damage
- Talk to your doctor about getting vaccinated against Hepatitis A and B

You may also want to consider joining a support group for people living with Hepatitis C. Talking with others may help you cope with your feelings and the challenges of living with Hepatitis C.

Side Bar:

Can a person spread Hepatitis C to his or her family or people he or she is close to?

Since the Hepatitis C virus is transmitted through blood, it is important that the person not share any personal items that might have blood on them, even in tiny amounts, such as toothbrushes, razors, or nail clippers. It is important to cover all cuts and sores and thoroughly clean all surfaces after they may have come in contact with infected blood.

What are some ways Hepatitis C is NOT spread?

Hepatitis C is not spread by kissing, hugging, sneezing, coughing, or sharing food, eating utensils or glasses.

Can a person spread Hepatitis C to his or her sex partners?

While the Hepatitis C virus can be passed during sex, it is uncommon. If a person has one, long-term steady sexual partner, the chance is very low that he or she will give Hepatitis C to that person through sexual activity. However, having multiple sex partners, or HIV, or engaging in rough sex can increase the risk of spreading the virus during sex.

For more information

Talk to your health professional, call your health department, or visit www.cdc.gov/hepatitis.

Department of Health & Human Services

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Division of Viral Hepatitis

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