

HEPATITIS C IN BRIEF

WHAT IS HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus. The hepatitis C virus attacks the liver and causes inflammation. 1 in 4 people who contract hepatitis C will clear the virus naturally. 3 in 4 people who contract hepatitis C will develop chronic infection and symptoms will emerge over a period of years. Some people go on to develop cirrhosis, scarring of the liver, liver failure and/or liver cancer.

HOW COMMON IS HEPATITIS C?

An estimated 264,000 people in Australia have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. Of these it is estimated 197,000 people are living with chronic hepatitis C. An estimated 9,700 new hepatitis C infections occur in Australia each year. The prevalence of hepatitis C in Australia is expected to continue to rise until at least 2015.

HOW IS HEPATITIS C PASSED ON?

Hepatitis C is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact; infected blood has to enter the bloodstream of another person. Blood does not have to be visible for transmission to occur.

Common routes of transmission in Australia are:

- sharing drug injecting equipment
- unsterile tattooing or body piercing
- receipt of blood products prior to 1990, when the screening of blood supplies began.

WHAT IMPACT CAN HEPATITIS C HAVE ON YOU?

Most people with chronic hepatitis C do experience a reduction in their quality of life and some are severely affected. All facets of life can be affected e.g. health, relationships, finance and employment.

Not everyone will have symptoms, however, the most common include:

- debilitating fatigue
- abdominal pain
- loss of appetite
- nausea and vomiting
- fever
- skin rashes

IS THERE A 'CURE' FOR HEPATITIS C?

There is an effective medical treatment available for hepatitis C. Treatment produces a cure rate of 50-80%, depending on the strain of hepatitis C. Treatment usually involves a combination of pegylated interferon (a weekly injection) and ribavirin (daily tablets). Treatment lasts 6-12 months. The side-effects of treatment vary from person and treatment does not suit everyone.

In 2005 around 2,000 people underwent treatment.

HOW CAN HEPATITIS C BE PREVENTED?

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. Avoiding exposure to the virus is the only way to prevent transmission of hepatitis C.

Exposure to the hepatitis C virus may be limited by ensuring:

- the use of sterile injecting drug equipment and safe injecting practices
- that tattoos, body art and piercings are only performed in a sterile way
- the adequate sterilisation of equipment used in medical and dental procedures
- the screening of blood supplies for the virus.

Distribution of clean needles and syringes to injecting drug users through Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) has been shown to be a cost effective way of preventing the transmission of hepatitis C.

Ongoing education to promote understanding of the need for prevention and increase knowledge of the means of prevention is likely to help prevent transmission.

HEPATITIS C IN AUSTRALIAN PRISONS

HEPATITIS C PREVALENCE IN PRISONS

- In June 2005 the prison population in Australia was approximately 25,000.
- Hepatitis C prevalence in prison entrants is estimated to be 34%.
- 30% to 40% of male prison entrants and 50-70% of female prison entrants are estimated to have hepatitis C virus antibodies. The presence of hepatitis C virus antibodies indicates exposure to the hepatitis C virus. Approximately 75% of people exposed to the hepatitis C infection will develop chronic hepatitis C and 25% will naturally clear the virus.
- In June 2005 it is estimated that 7,500 – 10,000 prisoners in Australia had hepatitis C virus antibodies. An estimated 800-1,200 of these were women.



HEPATITIS C TRANSMISSION IN PRISONS

- Prisons are a high risk environment for the transmission of hepatitis C. There is a high prevalence of hepatitis C among prison entrants. A significant proportion of inmates report engaging in behaviours where there is a risk for transmission, including sharing injecting drug equipment and receiving tattoos.
- There is evidence of prisoners contracting hepatitis C in prisons. However, rates of transmission of hepatitis C in prisons are difficult to estimate from available data.
- Australian studies have shown associations between unsafe injecting behaviour and tattooing in prisons and the acquisition of hepatitis C antibodies.
- Transmission in prisons may potentially have a greater impact on groups who are over-represented in Australian prisons, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

For more information on hepatitis C go to www.hepatitisaustralia.com or contact your local Hepatitis Council on 1300 HEP ABC (1300 437 222).