Yarnin' up Hep C

A Hepatitis C education resource for Indigenous communities

Relationships Australia South Australia

Government of South Australia

human services

Introduction

The Hepatitis C Virus known as HCV or Hep C, is a serious public health issue in Australia today affecting over 200,000 people. Nationally, there are thousands of new infections every year. People who inject drugs and anyone who has spent time in prison are particularly at risk.

This booklet has been written to support workers to talk about Hep C with Indigenous people. It provides information to help reduce the risk of infection and offers guidance on what to do if Hep C is diagnosed. There are four sections:

What is Hep C?	How is Hep C Transmitted?	Treatment and Care	Getting Support
The Virus	Transmission	Self care	List of services
Symptoms of infection	Risk activities	Treatments & side effects	

The lay out is designed to

* Encourage conversations about Hep C between workers and the community
* Invite people to look up answers to commonly asked questions
* Let people know where to go for support

Workers in health and community settings can play a big role in preventing Hep C transmission by raising awareness and spreading accurate information. They can also provide support to people living with Hep C so they can manage their illness. We hope this resource builds worker's knowledge and confidence in responding to these community needs.

More information and worker training can be provided by the South Australian Hep C worker-training project at Relationships Australia SA.
Contact: **(08) 8223 3433.**

What is Hepatitis C?

'Hepatitis' is an inflammation (swelling) of the liver. Hepatitis C is a virus carried in blood that can cause inflammation and permanent liver damage. The liver is a very important organ - it plays a vital role in fighting infection, getting rid of poisons (toxins) from the body and also breaking down food to release energy. If the liver fails, a person will die.

For about 25 % of people who become infected with Hep C, the body naturally clears the virus within 6 to 12 months.
They may never know they had Hep C, but during those months they could have passed the virus on to others.

For most people Hep C stays in the blood stream. Some never have any illness. Others experience a range of symptoms, but as Hep C is very slow acting, these symptoms may not develop for 15 to 20 years. After many years some people will develop serious liver diseases such as cirrhosis, or (rarely) liver cancer and they may die.

Advanced liver damage caused by Hep C can severely affect a person's quality of life. Even when no serious liver damage has occurred, symptoms of Hep C infection can include:

*depression	*nausea
*tiredness	*dry mouth
*aches and pains	*difficulty concentrating or remembering things

What is Hepatitis C?

What is Hepatitis ?

Hepatitis is when the liver becomes swollen. It is a sign that something is wrong. Your liver is really important for good health. If its not working properly you could become sick. After a while you could become very ill and may even die.

What is Hep C ?

Hep C is a blood-borne virus that affects the liver and can cause serious illness.

What will happen if I get Hep C ?

About 25 % of people who get Hep C will overcome the infection naturally, within about 6 to 12 months. Most people however have the virus in their blood for life. They may not feel sick for many years, but it is in their body and may slowly cause liver problems. If you get Hep C you may experience some symptoms. A very small number of people will eventually get seriously ill and die.

What are the symptoms ?

When they have Hep C some people feel sick, extremely tired, lack an appetite, have aches and pains, get depressed, have a dry mouth or mouth ulcers and teeth problems. But remember these can all be caused by other things and need to be checked by a health worker.

How do I know if I have Hep C?

You may not be able to tell if you have Hep C just from how you feel because lots of people with Hep C never get any symptoms. If you have ever been in prison, ever shared injecting equipment or re-used tattooing and piercing equipment you may have Hep C. It is possible to have a Hep C test to find out. Ask a doctor for advice.

Where can I get tested ?

Any doctor can organise a Hep C test for you. You can contact the services on the back page of this book to find out more.

Is there a cure ?

There are some treatments available for Hep C. Sometimes these can be successful, but they do not always get rid of the virus and the side effects can be difficult to manage. There is no vaccine you can take to stop you getting Hep C and if you have it, you can still get another dose, adding more stress to your liver.

What about Hep A and Hep B ?

Hep A and B are other viruses that can also cause problems with your liver. They can cause serious ill health. It is possible to have Hep C AND Hep A and B at the same time and this can be life threatening. There is a vaccine for Hep A and B. Speak to your doctor about this.

How is Hepatitis C Transmitted?

Hepatitis C is 'blood-borne' which means it is transmitted (passed from one person to another) in blood. Transmission happens when the blood of someone already infected gets into the bloodstream of another person. This is called “blood to blood contact”. Infected blood can get into another person's bloodstream through a break in the skin such as a needle-prick, open sores, cut or other opening. The virus has been found in other body fluids but not in enough concentration for it to be transmissible.

For transmission to occur:

1 blood must leave the body of a person who is already infected
2 there must be enough concentration of the virus in the blood to be infectious
3 the virus must survive in the blood outside the body
4 the infected blood must get into the bloodstream of another person through a cut or other opening

A tiny amount of blood can carry enough Hep C to be infectious. Even an invisible speck of blood can be enough.
Hep C stays alive in blood outside of the body for a long time, if the conditions are right.

In Australia by far the most common way of getting Hep C is through sharing or re-using needles and syringes. Sharing mix, swabs, straps or any other equipment when injecting drugs is also risky.

Other ways that people could become infected include:
* Sharing or re-using tattooing and body piercing equipment
* Mother to baby in the womb or at birth (low risk)
* Sharing razors, hair clippers, nail scissors, toothbrushes etc (low risk)
* Fighting where blood is present and exchanged (low risk)
* Sex (very low risk when there’s blood about such as STD’s, cuts or menstruation)
* Blood transfusions before 1990 (since 1990 blood donated in Australia has been screened for Hep C).

Blood Awareness:

Being 'blood aware' is the major way to reduce the risk of infection. This means noticing the presence of blood and being aware of the risk that blood might be exchanged. Someone who is blood aware will watch out for blood and know how to reduce the risk of blood to blood contact.

Reducing the risk of infection

* Don't share any injecting equipment - even swabs and straps might transfer specks of blood. If you cannot get clean needles (for example in prison) consider taking the drug another way such as swallowing or smoking.
* Don’t share tattooing needles and inks, or piercing equipment. Better still, get your tats and body piercing done by a professional who can sterilise their equipment.
* Don't share toothbrushes, hair clippers, nail clippers, or razors.
* Be careful if there is blood around during a fight.
* Avoid sexual practices that involve blood.
* If you think you have an STD (sexually transmitted disease) get checked and treated. It’s a good idea to use condoms - they prevent most STDs.

Prison is a really high risk place for Hep C because people who inject drugs can’t sterilise their equipment and many prisoners do their own tats with unsterilised needles.

How is Hepatitis C Transmitted?

Injecting drugs ?

If you **share** injecting equipment you might get Hep C. This is the most common way Hep C is passed on. The needles, syringe, swabs, spoons, straps, water and anything you use might have infected blood on or in it. Don't share your equipment. Get new stuff from a clean needle program.You could sniff, smoke, or swallow your drugs to avoid blood being present.

Tattooing and body piercing ?

If tattooing or piercing equipment is not sterilised after each use and if ink is re-used, specks of blood with Hep C in it can be passed from one person to another. Always go to a tattooist who sterilises the needles and uses new ink every time. If you do it yourself then clean the equipment thoroughly with detergent in cold running water and then disinfect it with diluted bleach.

Do not reuse inks.

Sharing razors, earrings, toothbrushes ?

You can get Hep C if there is infected blood on a razor, earrings/studs, toothbrush or hair clippers that you are using and it gets into your blood. You might not even see the blood, a tiny speck is enough. Keep your stuff separate.

Having sex ?

Hep C is rarely passed on during sex. But if there is blood around there is a risk. Blood can be present if you have sex during menstruation, if you use sex toys, or have rough sex that causes cuts and abrasions. Also if you have an STD you could have open sores. At these times there is a small risk of Hep C transmission.

Fighting ?

If there is blood around during a fight there is a small risk Hep C can be passed on. Remember tiny amounts of blood can transmit Hep C. Clean up with lots of cold water and detergent. Be blood aware.

Kissing, touching, hugging ?

You can't get Hep C from kissing, touching or hugging. Hep C does not get passed on in saliva or sweat.

Sharing cups, plates etc ?

Ordinary daily contact is not a risk. You can't get Hep C from sharing food or eating utensils. And you can't get it from a toilet seat, washing clothes in the same machine, sneezing, coughing or sharing a smoke.

Mother to baby ?

Hep C can sometimes be passed on by a mother to her baby. However, it is not clear whether transmission happens in the womb or during the birth. The greatest risk is thought to be if a woman gets Hep C when pregnant, which may be due to the amount of Hep C in her blood at that time.

Hep C is not passed on in breast milk, but if the mother has cracked nipples and there is blood around there may be a risk. In this case it is best to express the milk.

Treatment and Care

Hepatitis C affects people differently. When a person has the virus they may have any of the following:
* No symptoms at all
* Minor illness that causes some discomfort
* Major symptoms that stop the person from carrying out ordinary daily activities
* Serious, life-threatening disease

Things that have an impact on how sick a person may become include how much drugs or alcohol they take, older age at infection and whether they have another illness.

It's a good idea for a person with Hep C to get some advice on how to take care of themself. It may be necessary to reduce the amount of drugs and alcohol taken so that the liver is under less stress. A health worker may also make specific recommendations according to the person's individual situation and state of well being.

No matter what happens to their health, a person with Hep C can:
* Pass the virus on to others
* Be re-infected with another strain of Hep C that can make them sicker
* Maybe get rid of the virus altogether, with medical treatment

Testing for Hep C

The Hep C test finds out whether a person has had the virus in their blood by discovering antibodies that the body makes to fight the infection.
After someone has been infected it can take up to 6 months for these antibodies to show up. This is called the 'window period'. During the window period a person might test negative for Hep C, even if they are actually infected. For this reason repeat antibody tests may need to be be carried out.
It is possible to pass on the infection to others at this stage and so it is important to remain blood aware.

Treatments

There are only a few medical treatments for Hep C. These are still quite new and only helpful to some people. Different strains of the virus react differently to the treatments and there are many possible side effects. Specialist advice is needed to find out if someone is likely to respond well. Going on treatments can be stressful in itself and people often need extra support at this time. Treatments reduce the amount of virus in the blood and so help slow down serious liver damage and limit symptoms. If things go well, a person may completely clear the virus from their body and become free of Hep C altogether.

Many people have found that certain herbal medications and alternative therapies can reduce the symptoms of Hep C.
If this is being considered professional advice is recommended, as some herbs can also be toxic.

Depression

A person living with Hep C may experience low mood or a more severe depression. This could be triggered by a range of things such as coping with symptoms; facing stigma and discrimination; or as a response to life changes such as loss of relationships, work, or leisure activities. It is also thought that the virus itself may have a depressant effect. Clinical depression is a known side effect of Hep C medical treatments for some people. Anyone can experience this, although those with a history of depression are particularly at risk. Depression is a serious illness, but it can be treated. Workers need to be alert to signs of depression and refer clients for specialist support as appropriate.

Discrimination

One of the greatest stresses related to Hep C can be other people's attitudes. Many people don't know much about the virus and are frightened by the illness. They may also (wrongly) assume that all people with Hep C inject drugs and make negative judgements about the person because of this. Although it is illegal to discriminate against someone who has Hep C, it is often reported that people are treated badly and rejected by others. A worker must take care to help people understand Hep C so that services, families and communities offer appropriate support.

Treatment and Care

What can I do if I have Hep C ?

If you have Hep C: Live healthy - look after your liver by eating good food and drinking lots of water. Get good rest. Be Blood aware - take care not to get more Hep C in your blood from others, or to pass it on to anyone.
Get help - keep in touch with a doctor, and support services.

Who should I tell ?

Whoever did your Hep C test must, by law, tell the Health Department so they can collect statistics and work out how to stop Hep C spreading. Other than this, no one has to know. However, it can help your doctor provide good care if he or she knows, and your family may support you better if they know. It's up you.
The services on the back of this book can help you decide.

What about alcohol and drugs ?

Alcohol and other drugs can put strain on the liver. For this reason doctors often say a person with Hep C should reduce their intake. Also, the risk of overdose may be higher if you have liver damage from Hep C. Take extra care.

What should I eat ?

Most people with Hep C only need to follow the same dietary guidelines as everyone else. Eat more fruit, vegetables and cereals. Eat less sugar, alcohol and fat. However, if you are having specific problems with weight loss or another issue it's best to get special advice from a dietician.

What if I have another illness ?

Because Hep C puts a strain on your liver, this will affect the way your body copes with other illnesses. In particular Hep C has been found to make diabetes worse. If you have any illness it is important that your doctor also knows about your Hep C.

Can I get treatment ?

If Hep C has really started to badly affect your liver you can go on medications to either try to clear the virus altogether or at least reduce how much you have in your blood. This is only available through a doctor after assessment and does not suit all people.

What are the side effects of treatments ?

Current treatments may have side effects such as hair loss, weight loss, fever, nausea, diarrhoea, loss of concentration, problems sleeping, making diabetes worse, serious depression, or other mental illness.
If you have had depression you need to take special care while on treatments.
It is important for each individual person to weigh up the positive and negative effects of treatments. Talk to a doctor to help with your decision.

Can I get Hep C again ?

There are many different strains of Hep C and it is possible to be infected with more than one type. If this happens you are more likely to get sick because your liver is under greater stress. Even if you have Hep C already you can get another dose. Take care not to get re-infected - be blood aware.

Getting Support.

These services have more information to help people at risk of infection or living with Hep C.

Contact		Clean needle program?
Hepatitis C Council of SA	**(08) 8362 8443 or 1800 02 11 33 for regional callers**	**No**
Burdekin Clinic	**(08) 8231 4801**	**No**
Nunkuwarrin Yunti	**(08) 8223 5217**	**Yes**
Parks Health Service	**(08) 8243 5611**	**Yes**
Mosaic Hep C and HIV Counselling	**(08) 8223 4566**	**No**
Prison Hepatitis Hotline	**Arunta * # 3**	**No**
Hepatitis Helpline	**1800 621 780**	**No**
Karpandi Women's Centre	**(08) 8211 8344**	**No**
C-Clearly (Hep C Care, Liaison, Education and Risk-reduction)	**(08) 8410 0466**	**No**
SAVIVE (peer support around drug use)	**(08) 8362 9299**	**Yes**
Streetlink Youth Health	**(08) 8231 4844**	**Yes**
Byron Place Community Centre	**(08) 8231 0466**	**No**
Hutt Street Day Centre	**(08) 8223 2068**	**No**
OARS (Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Service)	**(08) 8210 0828**	**No**

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The cover design depicts infected blood from a syringe travelling from cell to cell and door to door as the needle is passed around in prison and communities. As we watch through the eye at the centre, loved ones become sick and may even die.

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