Hepatitis C: Get the Facts

a workbook
Inspired by and Dedicated to:
the OASIS Volunteer Staff
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What is HEPATITIS?
So “HEPATITIS” just means inflammation of the liver!

Like “tonsillitis” – inflammation of the tonsils!

or “appendicitis” – inflammation of the appendix!

There are over 100 causes of hepatitis, and the most common one in the US is ALCOHOL!

If hepatitis is caused by a VIRUS, it is given a LETTER, like hepatitis A, or hepatitis B, or hepatitis C!
What does the LIVER do?
The liver is your body’s factory.

It: Makes key proteins, such as those that clot your blood.

It: Recycles important molecules, like hemoglobin.

And it: removes poisons from your body.
Where is the liver located?
The **LIVER** is located under your ribs, on the right side of your abdomen.

Some people with hepatitis C get a swollen liver that can feel sore, but that doesn't always happen.

The liver's partner organ is the **SPLEEN**, located on the other side of the stomach, on the upper left of the abdomen.

The liver is about the size of a football.

The liver gets larger when it is inflamed, but if more seriously damaged it can become small and firm.
What is cirrhosis?
Cirrhosis is just the medical word for a lot of scarring in the liver.

Unlike a smooth reddish healthy liver, a liver with cirrhosis is firm, yellowish and bumpy, because much of it has been replaced with scar. It can feel like rubber!

Not surprisingly, if you have cirrhosis there is less healthy tissue to do its work, and that is why people with cirrhosis can become ill.

If you have SOME scar tissue but not a lot, that is called FIBROSIS. If you catch it early, your liver damage can be reversed: the liver can regenerate!
How do you get hepatitis C?
THINK BLOOD!!!

60 out of 100 people get it from NEEDLES.

5 out of 100 have a DIFFERENT risk factor, like a needlestick injury.

15 out of 100 get it from SEX.

Transfusion: 10 out of 100

In 10 out of 100 cases of Hep C, the risk factor is: UNKNOWN.
Is there a treatment for hepatitis C?
Yes!!!

It consists of injections of interferon, combined with ribavirin pills.

They are usually taken for 6-12 months.

These medicines probably cure over half the people who take them!
What about my friends and family?
It is EASY to prevent transmission!

Things **NOT** to worry about:
- Hugging, kissing
- Cups, plates
- Eating and cooking utensils
- Casual contact

What about **sex**?
Use **condoms** if you have more than one sex partner or aren't in a stable relationship.
If you are in a long-term monogamous relationship, your chances of passing it on are very low!
If you're not sure, talk to your partner. **BE SAFE!**

**DO** be careful with your **blood**.
- If you bleed, **clean it up**!
- Cover your wounds!
- **Don't share** razors or toothbrushes.
- **Never, ever share**: needles, syringes, cottons, cookers, or rinsewater.
- Watch out for cocaine straws, too.
- **Use your head!**
Is Hep C common?
YES!

In the United States, there are about 4 million cases.

There are 170 million cases worldwide.

There are 5x as many cases of hep C as HIV in the US.

Nearly 2 out of every 100 people in the US have been exposed.
Give it to me straight:

How much time have I got?
Relax! For most people, hepatitis C is a pretty mild disease.

Even after 20 years of being infected, fewer than 1 out of 5 people will have cirrhosis!

Some things that can make Hep c worse:
- Alcohol
- Cigarettes (true!)
- HIV and Hep B

So: take good care of yourself, avoid alcohol and cigarettes, and get regular medical attention.
Does everyone with hep C need treatment?
Most people with hep C have a healthy liver!

You will need treatment only if your liver is being damaged, or if you have severe symptoms, like fatigue.

This decision should be made by you and your doctor, together.
What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?
A lot of people don’t have any!

The most common symptom is fatigue.

Some people have muscle and joint aches, fever, nausea and vomiting, loss of appetite, or stomach pains.

You can have bad symptoms, and still be healthy. Get checked!
I feel fine!

Doesn’t that mean my liver’s ok?
Not Always!

Hep C can be sneaky!

Although you are probably healthy, some people develop cirrhosis from hepatitis C before they have any symptoms.

You can’t judge hep C by how you feel.

Why risk it?

Get checked!
My blood tests are ok.

Can I forget about hep C?
Unfortunately, no.

It **IS** true that good blood tests are **USUALLY** a good sign, and normal blood tests mean that you probably **DO** have a healthy liver.

But, that is not **ALWAYS** the case: **some people have liver damage even with good blood tests.**

So regardless of blood tests, it is important to see your doctor regularly and take good care of yourself.

**Stay healthy!**
I was told I have hepatitis A, B and C.

Now I'm really scared!
Relax!

That’s what a lot of people are told, but it is usually wrong!

What they SHOULD say is that you were EXPOSED. You were probably infected in the past, and still have antibodies in your blood to prove it.

For instance, if you had the mumps before, your mumps test would be positive. That doesn’t mean your cheeks are swollen!

You MIGHT have hepatitis B, but it is relatively uncommon. Ask your doctor, so you can be sure.

It is important to know about your hep A and B tests. If you haven’t been exposed, then you should be vaccinated!
What does a positive hep C test mean?
Probably not what you think!

It doesn’t mean you are INFECTED, it means you were EXPOSED.

Two different things!

About one in four people clear hep C on their own! They test positive too, even though the virus is GONE.

So remember: a positive hep C test doesn’t mean you still have the virus.

You need another blood test, usually called a viral load or PCR test, to see if the hep C virus is still in your body.

It is important to find out if you are still infected! If you aren’t, you definitely won’t need treatment, will you?
What is a viral load?
An important blood test!

It is also known as the PCR.

It tells you whether you still have virus in the blood, or whether it is gone.

A lot of people have virus numbers in the MILLIONS!

WHAT?????

Relax!! Most people don’t know this: high virus numbers don’t mean you have worse liver damage, so don’t worry!

Just get checked!
What is a genotype?
Another important blood test!

Genotypes are like different strains of the hep C virus. Your genotype tells you how well you will respond to hepatitis C treatment!

There are 6 hepatitis C genotypes, but most people in the US have genotype 1, 2, or 3.

Genotype 1 is the most common; about 75% of people have this genotype. Naturally, it is the hardest one to get rid of! It needs a year of treatment, and the chance of remission is about 40%.

Almost everyone else in the US has genotypes 2 or 3. These genotypes are easier to treat! You usually only need treatment for 6 months, and your chance of remission is about 80%!

Important! ALL genotypes cause the same amount of liver damage: you are no more likely to get cirrhosis if you have genotype 1, 2 or 3.
How can I tell if my liver is being damaged by hepatitis C?
You can't always tell from blood tests!

Blood tests only give you a general picture of how healthy your liver is.

**True:** most people with normal blood tests have a healthy liver.

However: since these tests come from the blood and not the liver, they can sometimes fool you!

The best way to tell if there is any damage in your liver is to have a liver biopsy.

A biopsy is the **MOST** accurate way to see if the hepatitis C virus is causing scarring of your liver.
Liver biopsy!

OUCH!
Relax! Most people say that worrying about the biopsy was the worst part!

A liver biopsy is done by passing a small hollow needle through your skin and into the liver and removing a tiny, wormlike piece.

Don't worry: your skin will be numbed first!

The actual biopsy takes only a few minutes. Most people are a little sore for a few days, like getting punched in the side.

The piece of liver will be examined under the microscope to look for inflammation and scarring.

Not everyone needs a liver biopsy!

You should discuss with your doctor whether this test is necessary for you.
I heard hep C treatment is hard.

What is it like?
It **IS** hard, but most people that need treatment are able to get through it.

You will need 6-12 months of interferon injections and ribavirin pills.

Many people will have side effects, like flu-like symptoms, fatigue, and irritability. You will need to work closely with your doctor to manage any problems that may come up.

Your doctor will also need to watch your blood counts and will monitor you for depression caused by interferon.

It may not be fun, but if your liver needs treatment it’s worth it!
Can hepatitis C be cured???
Guess what? We think so!

About half the people who take hep C treatment go into remission: they don’t have any virus in their blood 6 months after their treatment is over.

Most of those people still don’t have virus 10 years later!

Is it hiding? Maybe.

But it seems more and more likely that hepatitis C can be CURED!!!