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Hepatitis C Tests and Treatments

Introduction

This Fact Sheet provides a summary of information about tests and treatment for people with hepatitis C virus (HCV). If you are looking for specific information about treatment with Pegylated Interferon/Ribavirin please refer to the Factsheet “Ribavirin/pegylated interferon combination therapy for people with hepatitis C”.

Blood tests

There are a number of different tests that are recommended for people who have HCV. The following blood tests are the more common ones that your doctor may order.

Hepatitis C antibodies (HCV Ab)

The HCV antibody test is a screening test and is the first test that is done to see if someone has been exposed to HCV. Antibodies are produced by the immune system in response to exposure to a new virus to try and prevent the person from becoming infected.

The detection of HCV antibodies shows that a person has been exposed to HCV at some stage in their life. It does not necessarily mean that the person has HCV infection as the immune system may have successfully eliminated it. However, once someone has a HCV antibody it will always be detected on a HCV antibody test regardless of whether or not the person goes on to develop HCV.

Also, if you have treatment for HCV and clear the virus, you will always have antibodies. These antibodies are not harmful to the body in any way.

Hepatitis C RNA PCR (HCV PCR)

A PCR test is the next test that is done when someone has a positive HCV antibody test result. Not all people who are exposed to HCV will go on to develop chronic hepatitis C.

A PCR test will confirm whether or not there is virus in your blood. A negative result means that your body's immune system has successfully fought off the virus – referred to as clearing the virus.





Hepatitis C

A positive PCR test result means that your body has not been able to clear the virus, and that you have chronic HCV.

Hepatitis C Viral Load

If the PCR test is positive, a viral load test can be done to measure the amount of virus that is in your blood.

Hepatitis C genotype

This test determines the type of HCV that you have. There are six main types of HCV known as genotypes and several sub-types within each genotype. In Australia genotypes 1a, 1b and 3a are the most common. The genotype that you have does not seem to alter the progression of disease but can alter your response to treatments for HCV.

Hepatitis C: Tests and Treatments

Interleukin 28B (IL28B)

The IL28B test is a relatively new test that can predict how well an individual who has genotype 1 may respond to Interferon treatment. The test determines which of 3 genetic groups someone falls into: CC, CT or TT. Those with CC are most likely to have a successful Interferon treatment outcome and clear the virus.

Alanine transaminase (ALT)

This is an enzyme produced by the liver. Increases of this enzyme can be a sign of liver inflammation.

What do the blood tests mean?

Australian Guidelines recommend that all people with chronic hepatitis C (HCV) is seen every 6 to 12 months.

Other tests

Fibroscan:

Fibroscan is a type of ultrasound that measures liver stiffness and is at least 95% accurate in diagnosing cirrhosis or advanced fibrosis. Fibroscan is non-invasive and can be done in an outpatient clinic setting.





Liver biopsy :

Liver biopsy was previously used to assess liver damage before Fibrosan was available. The biopsy removes a small core of tissue from the liver to assess scarring and inflammation. There are some cases where biopsy may still be indicated but this is rare.

Ultrasound:

A liver ultrasound uses sound waves to produce images of the structure of the liver. Ultrasound can detect changes or masses that may be associated with liver cancer that are not able to be detected from physical (external) examination.

Testing babies born to mothers with hepatitis C

There are 2 tests used to determine whether a baby has contracted HCV – a PCR test and an antibody test. The accuracy of these tests depends on the age of the infant.

Antibodies cross over from the placenta of the mother to the baby and will be positive on an antibody test for at least 18 months. It is advisable to talk with a hepatitis specialist about when to test an infant.

Medical treatment

What are current medical treatments and what do they do?

Historically in Australia HCV was treated with pegylated interferon and ribavirin, provided together as combination therapy.

Interferons are a group of proteins that form part of the body's immune system and are active when you have a viral infection (e.g. a cold). Giving additional interferon in large doses boosts the immune system to fight the virus and reduces the amount of virus in the blood.

Interferon is given as a weekly injection into the tissue of the stomach (like an insulin injection).

Ribavirin is an antiviral drug which interferes with the ability of the virus to replicate. It is taken in tablet form.





For more information see the Fact Sheet “Ribavirin/pegylated interferon combination therapy for people with hepatitis C”. You can also speak to your doctor or contact a hepatitis clinic (see list of clinics below).

New medications

New hepatitis C Treatments direct-acting antiviral (DAA) medicines

These exciting new generation treatments have been available in Australia, on the Pharmaceuticals Benefits Scheme from 1 March 2016, through your GP or specialist.

The new treatments have fewer side effects, are much faster acting (taking treatment time from one year to twelve weeks in most cases) and are highly effective with a cure rate of 95-97 per cent.

These treatments are sofosbuvir with ledipasvir (Harvoni); sofosbuvir (Sovaldi); daclatasvir (Daklinza); and ribavirin (Ibavir); also; paritaprevir + ritonavir + ombitasvir + dasabuvir (Viekira Pak®) paritaprevir + ritonavir + ombitasvir + dasabuvir + ribavirin (Viekira Pak RBV®)

For more information please visit

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/hepatitis-c-faq>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/videos/Hepatitis%20C%20Cure>

<https://www.hep.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/newtreatments.pdf>

Working with your Doctor

There are certain GPs who specialise in seeing people with HCV. Contact Hepatitis Victoria to find out if there is a GP in your local area who specialises in HCV. As well as having a good GP it is advisable to see a liver specialist (e.g. gastroenterologist, hepatologist, infectious diseases physician) who can advise you on medical management issues and keep you informed about treatment options.

It is very important that you feel comfortable with your GP and liver/hepatitis specialist so that you can ask questions and find out all the information you require about HCV. If you do not feel comfortable with your current doctor try and find one that you do feel comfortable with.





Questions to ask your doctor

What are my ALT levels and what does it mean?

This can give you an idea of the degree of inflammation occurring in your liver.

How should I look after my health?

This may give you practical ideas to slow the rate of disease progression.

Do I need to reduce my alcohol intake or change my diet?

Both of these can affect the liver and it may be necessary to change them to improve your health. You may wish to be referred to a dietician for help with your diet.

Are the symptoms that I am experiencing related to hepatitis C and do other people experience them?

May give you an idea as to whether these are common symptoms and whether you need to follow the problem up further.

What is my hepatitis C genotype?

This will tell you how long you will need treatment for and whether an IL28B test is appropriate (for genotype 1 only). There does not seem to be relationship between disease progression and the genotype that you have.

Are there any problems with my prescription medications?

Your doctor will be able to tell you if these medications affect your liver, which may be a problem for some, but not all, people with HCV.

You should also discuss any other problems or symptoms you are having in case you need to be referred to any other specialists.

Complementary medicine





This includes western herbal medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, homeopathy, naturopathy, flower essences, acupuncture and various forms of massage.

If you are seeing a complementary practitioner, it is important to inform your doctor. Some herbal preparations and supplements have caused damage to the liver. Complimentary medicines are not able to cure Hepatitis C.

Not all practitioners of complementary therapies are required to be registered with a professional body. To be registered, a practitioner is required to have completed a tertiary level course in their field of practice. Choosing a practitioner who is registered with one of the professional bodies is recommended.

To find practitioners of complementary medicine who have expertise in hepatitis C contact Hepatitis Victoria or the Australian Complementary Therapy Association (see contact details below):

Hepatitis Victoria

Ph: (03) 9380 4644

Toll Free: 1800 703 003

Email: admin@hepvic.org.au

www.hepvic.org.au

Australian Natural Therapists Association

Phone Enquiries: 1800 817 577 | Fax: 07 5409 8200

Postal: PO Box 657, MAROOCHYDORE QLD 4558

info@anta.com.au - general inquiries

<http://www.australiannaturaltherapistsassociation.com.au/>

Liver and hepatitis clinics in Victoria

These are the specialist liver or hepatitis clinics in Victoria. Contact the clinics for information on making an appointment. Ask for the Liver or Hepatitis Clinic. You will need a referral from your GP.

METROPOLITAN MELBOURNE

Public

Alfred Hospital, Prahran (03) 9076 2223

Austin/Repatriation Medical Centre, Heidelberg (03) 9496 2444

Bayside Gastroenterology, Moorabbin (03) 9781 5959





A free and confidential service for people seeking information about HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

Hepatitis C

Northern Hospital, Epping (03) 8405 8335
Royal Children's Hospital, Parkville, Liver Diseases Clinic (03) 9345 6180
Royal Melbourne Hospital, Parkville (03) 9342 7212
Monash Health Liver Clinic Clayton, Cranbourne, Casey 1300 342 273
St. Vincent's Hospital, Fitzroy (03) 9288 3475
Western Hospital, Footscray (03) 8345 6490

METROPOLITAN MELBOURNE

Private

Box Hill Hospital (03) 9895 3353
Cabrini Private Hospital, East Malvern (03) 9508 1862 (Melbourne
Gastrointestinal Investigations Unit)
Ringwood East, Maroondah Hospital Liver Clinic (03) 9871 3370
St. Kilda, Barkly Street Clinic (St. Vincent's) (03) 9534 0531

COUNTRY VICTORIA

Public

Ballarat Community Health Liver Clinic 5338 4500
Geelong Liver Clinic (03) 4215 1396

Integrated Health Care Service – Primary Health Care Services for people
who inject
Access Health, 31 Grey Street, St. Kilda (03) 9536 7780

Healthy Living Clinic, Innerspace, 4 Johnston Street, Collingwood (03)
9468 2800

Dr Rob Weiss, Frankston Healthcare, 42 Young Street, Frankston (03)
9770 002

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