



May 2010

1. Hepatitis C: Newly Diagnosed

Education +
Resource Centre
(ERC)

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1) What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that affects the liver. It is not related to HIV/AIDS.

2) What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver.

There are several different types of hepatitis. They all have different causes.

Some types of hepatitis (liver inflammation) are caused by viruses. These viruses are named after letters in the alphabet, although they are quite different viruses: hepatitis A, B, C, D, E, etc.

Other types of hepatitis (liver inflammation) are caused by alcohol or drugs/medications. These are not related to the types of hepatitis caused by viruses.

Although hepatitis C has probably existed for thousands of years, scientists did not identify the virus itself until 1989. The virus now known as hepatitis C was previously included in a group of viruses called 'non-A non-B hepatitis viruses'. These were viruses that caused hepatitis but were neither the hepatitis A nor the hepatitis B virus.

3) You have been told you have hepatitis C

What does this mean?

You have just been told that you have hepatitis C. This means that you have been infected with the hepatitis C virus.

Some people clear the hepatitis C virus from their blood but still have antibodies to the virus. These people do not have hepatitis C any more. You need to check with your doctor to see whether you still have hepatitis C virus in your blood. A **PCR test** will confirm whether the hepatitis C virus is still in your blood (see Tests and Treatments Fact Sheet).

Having hepatitis C does NOT mean that you are dying.

Everyone deals with the news of a hepatitis C diagnosis in their own way. Whatever you are feeling is OK. You may be experiencing a range of feelings and emotions including shock,



disbelief, anger, sadness, anxiety or fear. You may be trying to block out painful feelings or memories or you may be feeling relieved that you finally know why you haven't been feeling well.

4) What happens when you are first infected with Hepatitis C?

Many people who are infected with the hepatitis C virus do not have any symptoms and often don't even know they have the virus until a routine health check.

If people do experience acute (when they are first in contact with the virus) symptoms of the virus, these can vary from person to person. Symptoms such as nausea and abdominal discomfort, tiredness and lethargy have been reported. A yellow discolouration of the skin and eyes (called jaundice), dark urine and pale stools can occur in some people.

The acute phase of the illness lasts for up to 6 months and if it persists, it is called chronic hepatitis C. You have a ~20% chance of your body's immune system clearing the virus in the acute stage without treatment. This means that you will still have antibodies to the virus but your PCR test for the virus itself will be negative. Chronic hepatitis C can cause liver damage.

The symptoms most people experience with chronic Hepatitis C can range in severity, intensity and length of time. Some of the common symptoms may be:

- general feeling of being unwell
- fatigue and tiredness-“brain fog”
- abdominal discomfort, with nausea, bloating and changes in bowel habits
- discomfort over the liver (upper right side of abdomen)
- mood changes, commonly depression
- sweating.

You may also notice that you can't handle some foods as well as you used to, such as spicy or fatty foods, and also alcohol.

Often the symptoms are not noticed for years after you are infected with the virus. Many people may only begin to experience symptoms 10 to 15 years after they are infected, causing some people to go undiagnosed.

However, these symptoms are also common to other health problems and may not be related to hepatitis C or to the degree of liver damage.



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Produced by

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