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7. Hepatitis C: Tests and treatments

Education +
Resource Centre
(ERC)

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Tests

There are a few tests that are done to check how your hepatitis C is going. The following tests are the more common ones that your doctor may order.

Hepatitis C Antibodies (HCV Ab):

Antibodies are produced in response to the body's infection with a new virus. Therefore the detection of hepatitis C antibodies shows that a person has been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. It does not necessarily mean that the person still has the virus.

Hepatitis C RNA PCR (HCV PCR):

This is a test to see whether there is virus in your blood. RNA is the substance in cells from which proteins are made and used by the hepatitis C virus to multiply. This test is used to see if there is any virus detectable and actively multiplying in your blood. PCR is the name of the actual type of test used to detect the multiplying virus.

Hepatitis C Viral Load:

This test looks at the actual amount of virus that is in your blood. It gives an amount of copies (the actual virus) per one ml of blood.

Hepatitis C Genotype:

This test determines the type of your hepatitis C. There are 6 main types of the hepatitis C virus. The type of virus that you have does not seem to alter the progression of disease but can alter your response to treatments for hepatitis C.

Alanine transaminase (ALT):

This is a liver enzyme found in the liver. Increases of this enzyme can be a sign of inflammation in the liver. As hepatitis C causes inflammation in the liver, this enzyme is used as a guide as to the activity of the virus at that time.

There are other liver function tests that are performed but the above tests give a good indication of what stage the virus is at and what your options are for treatment.



Liver Biopsy:

A liver biopsy is performed to assess accurately the effect the hepatitis C virus is having on your liver. The biopsy removes a small core of tissue from the liver – approximately 20mm in length. This tissue is assessed and gives an idea of the specific changes that can occur in liver tissue.

These changes can range from mild inflammation and scarring of the liver to severe inflammation and scarring of the liver. Most people (approx. 80%) only ever have mild to moderate inflammation and scarring of their liver. A few people (approx 20%) may end up with severe scarring of the liver is called cirrhosis. Cirrhosis is when the liver is completely scarred and has fibrous tissue throughout.

The damage that the hepatitis C virus has on your liver is a gradual process over many years. Other factors such as alcohol and your diet can also affect the liver.

Ultrasound:

This is a scan that looks at the outside of your liver. It also looks at the blood flow through the liver. By doing this test the doctor is better able to assess the state of the liver but it is not as thorough as a liver biopsy.

Fibroscan:

The Fibroscan measures liver stiffness that is directly related to liver fibrosis. It is non-invasive - measuring liver stiffness with an ultrasound probe - and is at least 95% accurate in diagnosing cirrhosis or advanced fibrosis across a range of different liver diseases. This new way of measuring liver disease can be done in an outpatient appointment and takes just 10-15 minutes. Available at The Alfred Hospital.

Testing children

If you had hepatitis C before your children were born, they may have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus. The risk that your children may have hepatitis C is low and is only possible if the virus was active (i.e. your PCR result is positive) when you were pregnant and/or giving birth.

This brings up issues about whether to test your children to see if they have contracted hepatitis C. You may need time to think carefully about this and wish to talk to a counsellor while you make this decision.

If you decide to test your children to see if they have hepatitis C, wait until they are at least 18 months old. Children gain their mother's antibodies to viruses at birth and PCR tests may be negative early on. It is not until they are at least 18 months of age that you can tell if the children are still affected by hepatitis C virus.



The issue about whether to treat children who have hepatitis C is not clear. If you find that your child has hepatitis C, discuss this with your local doctor. You may wish to get a referral to the liver clinic at a children's hospital.

Medical treatment

Currently in Australia hepatitis C is treated with two medications, pegylated interferon and ribavirin, usually provided together as a combination therapy.

Interferon is a group of proteins that occur naturally in the body when there are viral infections (e.g. a cold). The interferon used in the treatment is a manufactured copy of the ones made in your body and is given in the form of an injection. By giving your body more interferon than it normally has, it is thought that the interferon could slow the reproduction of the hepatitis C virus and give the body a chance to increase its immune systems response to fight the virus.

Ribavirin is an antiviral drug which is in tablet form. Its action against the hepatitis C virus is unknown. It appears to help Interferon in fighting the virus and reduces inflammation in the liver.

For more information, speak to your doctor or contact a hepatitis clinic (see list of clinics below).

For further information on Interferon/Ribavirin combination therapy go to the Education + Resource Centre fact sheet: http://www.hivhepsti.info/riba_inter.htm

Research is being carried out on hepatitis C treatments on an ongoing basis. For more information contact the Education + Resource Centre or visit the Education + Resource Centre **Hepatitis** page (www.hivhepsti.info)

Working with your doctor

It is very important that you feel comfortable with your GP and liver or hepatitis specialist so that you can ask questions and find out all the information you require about your hepatitis C.

There are a few GPs who specialise in seeing people with hepatitis C. If you find that your GP is not able to meet your needs and answer your questions adequately, you may need to access another GP or source your information from other places. You do not have to stay with your current GP. It is your right to keep looking until you find a doctor who meets your needs.

It is advisable to see a doctor who specialises in liver disease or hepatitis (e.g., gastroenterologist, hepatologist, infectious diseases physician) for assessment of hepatitis C and see their GP for any other problems that they may have.

You need to be able to ask as many questions as you want. Often a liver or hepatitis specialist is more up to date with the current information regarding hepatitis C.



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 dietitian 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. There does not seem to be relationship between disease progression and the genotype that you have.

What are the complications of a liver biopsy and why should I have one? allows you to be fully informed of the risks and benefits of the procedure.

Should I have treatment, what is the likelihood of me clearing the virus? may help you decide whether to start treatment now or wait till there are better treatments available.

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 hepatitis C.

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

Liver/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.

Country

Public

Ballarat Base Hospital Liver Clinic (Mair St)

(03) 5202 4444

Geelong Liver Clinic

(03) 5226 7254



Melbourne Metropolitan

Public

Alfred Hospital, Prahran	(03) 9076 2223
Austin/Repatriation Medical Centre, Heidelberg	(03) 9496 3498
Bayside Gastroenterology, Frankston	(03) 9781 4434
Monash Medical Centre, Clayton	(03) 9594 5545
Northern Hospital, Epping	(03) 84058335
Royal Children's Hospital, Parkville, Liver Diseases Clinic	(03) 9345 6180
	Fax 93455034
Royal Melbourne Hospital, Parkville	(03) 9342 7212
Springvale Community Health Centre (Monash Med Centre) (Appointments via Monash clinic)	(03) 9594 5545
St. Vincent's Hospital, Fitzroy	(03) 9288 3580
	Fax 92883509
Western Hospital, Footscray	(03) 83456490
	Fax 83456856

Private

Box Hill Hospital	(03) 9895 3353
Cabrini Private Hospital, East Malvern (Melbourne Gastrointestinal Investigations Unit)	(03) 9508 1862
Ringwood East, Maroondah Hospital Liver Clinic	(03) 9871 3333
	Fax 98713202
St Kilda, Barkly St Clinic (St Vincent's)	(03) 9534 0531

Complementary medicine

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

Complementary medicine aims to support your whole wellbeing. Some preparations and treatments specifically support the health of your liver and digestive system. Studies have shown that herbal preparations, e.g. CH100, help decrease symptoms such as abdominal discomfort, which can be experienced by people with hepatitis C. Herbal preparations such as CH100 and St Mary's Thistle can also help to reduce liver inflammation in some people. If you are interested in taking herbal or homeopathic therapies, you should consult a naturopath or Chinese herbalist or homeopath so that they can advise you on the therapy and medicine that is specific to your needs.

If you are seeing a complementary practitioner, it is important to inform your doctor.

Some herbal preparations 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



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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 C Victoria**
Ph: (03) 9380 4644
Toll Free: 1800 703 003
Email: hepcvic@vicnet.net.au
www.hepcvic.org.au
- **Australian Complementary Therapy Association**
Ph 9650 5327 email: diversity@diversity.org.au
www.diversity.org.au

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Produced by

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www.hivhepsti.info

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