



HEPATITIS C LESSONS • PART 1

What Is Hepatitis C, How Does It Spread and What Are the Symptoms?

PURPOSE

To provide people in your community some basic facts about hepatitis C, and to educate them about the liver in general; to teach them how the liver works, why it is a very important organ, and how the liver can be damaged by hepatitis C.

FACTS

The members of your group may be feeling alone, but the fact is, that is far from true. They may be surprised when you tell them the numbers:

- *2.7 to 3.9 million people in the United States are infected with the hepatitis C virus*
- *Approximately 50-75% of infected people don't even know they have hepatitis C*
- *Up to 19,000 people die from problems due to hepatitis C each year*
- *Hepatitis C is most common among people who were born from 1945 through 1965. This is because of the high rates of infection in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s*
- *Hepatitis C is the leading cause of liver cancer, and the main reason for liver transplants*
- *Left untreated, up to 85% of people who have hepatitis C will have it for the rest of their lives. This is called chronic hepatitis C. People with hepatitis C can be cured or can "clear the virus." This is also known as a "sustained virologic response" (SVR). This happens when the virus does not show up in the blood 12 weeks after you have finished taking treatment*

DISCUSSION TOPICS

How can hepatitis C affect your liver?

How does it spread?

How doesn't the virus spread?

What is hepatitis C?

Are there different types of hepatitis C?

How are they different?

What are the symptoms?

Handout: Resources for additional hepatitis C information

Here are some sample questions and answers you can use as you like during your meeting

What is hepatitis?

Hepatitis is inflammation (swelling) of the liver. When a virus causes inflammation of the liver, it is called viral hepatitis. There are many types of viral hepatitis. In the United States, the most common types are hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.

All 3 viruses can be spread from one person to another. But how they spread, how long the illness lasts, and how they are treated are different for each virus.

- *Hepatitis A is usually spread through contact with contaminated surfaces or foods. For instance, touching someone who has not properly washed his or her hands after using the toilet, or eating food that is infected with the virus, can spread the disease*

- *Hepatitis B and hepatitis C are each spread when blood from an infected person gets into someone else's blood*
- *Hepatitis C can be spread in many ways:*
 - *Receiving blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992*
 - *Sharing drug needles or cocaine straws*
 - *Using unclean surgical, tattooing, or piercing equipment*

The hepatitis C virus is found in the blood and the liver of people infected with hepatitis C. This virus can multiply (replicate) quickly and infect liver cells. After many years, the liver can become damaged and may not be able to do all the things it needs to do.

NOTES

Are there different types of hepatitis C?

There are at least 7 different types of hepatitis C, called genotypes, and they are numbered from 1 to 7:

- *Genotype 1, which is the most common in the United States*
- *Genotypes 2 and 3; fewer people in the United States have these 2 genotypes*
- *Genotypes 4, 5, 6, and 7, which are not very common in the United States*

Understanding genotypes is important because the course of treatment is different for some genotypes than others. That’s why people with hepatitis C need to get tested and learn which genotype they have. This ensures that they will get the best possible treatment. The genotype test is usually conducted only once, because a person’s genotype doesn’t change unless they are reinfected. If this happens, the person should get retested.

NOTES

Acute and chronic hepatitis C: What's the difference?

The first 6 months of being infected with the hepatitis C virus is called acute hepatitis C. During this time, most people who are infected with hepatitis C may have mild symptoms, if any at all. If they do have symptoms, they may feel like they have the flu.

If someone still has the virus after 6 months, it is called chronic (long-lasting) hepatitis C. Most hepatitis C infections become chronic. Some people can get rid of it on their own, but most people—up to 85%—cannot.

NOTES

What are the signs and symptoms of hepatitis C?

As chronic hepatitis C progresses, people with the virus may not feel any symptoms, or only a few. Some people have only mild symptoms that come and go. Symptoms can include:

- *Fatigue (feeling tired)*
- *Feeling like they have a mild case of the flu (fever, headache, muscle and joint pain)*
- *Confusion, forgetfulness, lack of concentration or “brain fog”*
- *Pain in the area of the liver (on the right side of the abdomen, behind the lower ribs)*
- *Insomnia (trouble sleeping)*
- *Upset stomach*
- *Diarrhea*
- *Lack of interest in food or sex*
- *Depression (hopelessness, sadness, or irritability)*

By themselves, these symptoms do not mean you have hepatitis C. If you have 1 or more of these symptoms, talk to your healthcare provider about them at your next visit.

NOTES

How does hepatitis C harm the liver?

When hepatitis C is in the liver, it causes inflammation (swelling) and kills cells. Over a long period of time, the inflammation can cause a buildup of dead cells in the liver called scarring. This scarring can slow blood flow to the liver and, as a result, the liver can't do what it needs to do to keep you healthy.

Healthcare providers divide scarring into 2 levels:

- *Mild scarring is called fibrosis (fi-BRO-sis)*
- *A large amount of scarring is called cirrhosis (si-RO-sis). Cirrhosis causes the liver to begin to shrink, harden, and stop working. This is a serious problem*

A liver that is damaged with cirrhosis can lead to:

- *Liver cancer*
- *Liver failure*
- *A liver transplant*

NOTES

How does someone get and then pass on hepatitis C?

The hepatitis C virus is spread when the blood of someone with hepatitis C mixes with the blood (or body fluids that contain blood) of someone else.

Some of the ways the hepatitis C virus was spread before 1992 were through:

- *Blood transfusions*
- *Blood products*
- *Transplanted organs*

Before 1992, blood products sometimes contained the hepatitis C virus. Since then, blood products are tested for the virus, so now it's very rare for people to get hepatitis C in this manner.

Today, people typically get the hepatitis C virus by:

- *Sharing a needle or other drug equipment (“works”) to inject drugs, hormones, vitamins, steroids. There is also a chance of getting it by sharing straws for inhaling drugs (cocaine (coke), methamphetamines (crank, meth))*
- *Reusing tattooing needles and ink*
- *Reusing body-piercing needles*
- *Reusing acupuncture needles*

- *Using a dialysis (kidney) machine that wasn't properly cleaned and has someone else's blood in it*
- *Accidentally getting pricked by unsterilized medical equipment and instruments that have been in contact with blood (health and emergency workers could be at risk for this happening)*
- *Having sex with someone who has hepatitis C, but this doesn't happen very often*
- *Sharing razors, toothbrushes, or manicure and pedicure tools that have traces of infected blood*

Although it doesn't happen often, pregnant women with hepatitis C can sometimes pass on the virus to their unborn children.

As a general rule, anything shared that has blood on it can pass on the hepatitis C virus. This includes blood from cuts, nosebleeds, and even a woman's period.

There's no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C. But there are many ways to protect yourself and others from getting it. If you know how hepatitis C is spread, then you can tell others how to avoid getting it.

What does **NOT** cause the spread of hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C cannot be spread by:

- *Holding someone's hand or shaking hands*
- *Ordinary touching, such as hugging, or kissing*
- *Being coughed on or sneezed on*
- *Eating food or drinking water*
- *Sharing eating utensils, plates, or drinking glasses*
- *Breast-feeding*
- *Using a swimming pool*

NOTES

Review Points

- *More than 3 million people in the United States are infected with the hepatitis C virus*
- *About 50 - 75% of infected people don't even know they have hepatitis C*
- *Left untreated, up to 85% of people who have hepatitis C will have it for the rest of their lives. This is called chronic hepatitis C. People with hepatitis C can be cured or can "clear the virus." This is also known as a "sustained virologic response" (SVR). This happens when the virus does not show up in the blood 6 months after you have finished taking treatment*
- *Hepatitis C is most common among people who were born from 1945 through 1965 (Baby Boomers). This is because of the high rates of infection in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s*
- *There are at least 7 types of hepatitis C, called genotypes, numbered from 1 to 7. Genotype 1 is the most common in the US.*
- *Hepatitis C causes inflammation (swelling) of the liver. Over time, inflammation can cause dead liver cells to build up and cause scarring. This scarring can slow blood flow to the liver and, as a result, the liver can't work right to keep you healthy*
- *Mild scarring is called fibrosis. A large amount of scarring is called cirrhosis. Cirrhosis causes the liver to begin shrinking and hardening*
- *Discuss the timing of your treatment with your healthcare provider*
- *General rule: Anything shared that has blood on it can pass on the hepatitis C virus. This includes blood from cuts, nosebleeds, and even a woman's period*

Additional Hepatitis C Information:

Hepatitis C Support Project

www.hcvadvocate.org

Provides resources for and information on hepatitis C that range from clinical information to alternative treatments and complementary therapies

American Liver Foundation

1-800-GO-LIVER (1-800-465-4837)

www.liverfoundation.org

Information on liver diseases, including hepatitis C

Caring Ambassadors

Hepatitis C Program

1-503-632-9032

www.hepcchallenge.org

Hepatitis C Choices book (free PDF); information and awareness

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636)

www.cdc.gov/hepatitis

Fact sheets and answers to frequently asked questions about hepatitis

Hepatitis Education Project

www.hepeducation.org

A website for people with hepatitis C and their friends, family members, and healthcare providers. It has hepatitis information about advocacy and support, as well as other resources

Hep C Connection

1-800-522-HEPC (1-800-522-4372)

www.hepc-connection.org

Resources and support for people affected by the hepatitis C virus

Hepatitis Foundation International

1-800-891-0707

www.hepfi.org

Information on liver disease and viral hepatitis

MedicineNet (WebMD)

www.medicinenet.com/hepatitis_C/article.htm

Medical information on hepatitis C

National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project (NATAP)

www.natap.org

Educates people about HIV and hepatitis, and advocates treatment. Provides current news and conference coverage about hepatitis C

National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK)

www.niddk.nih.gov

Contains a database of educational materials and a discussion of hepatitis C

National Institutes of Health (NIH)

www.nih.gov

Comprehensive health website with links to health publications and current research

United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)

www.hepatitis.va.gov

Information, brochures, and manuals on hepatitis C

Suggested Reading:

A Guide to Understanding Hepatitis C: 2015

www.hcvadvocate.org/hepatitis/factsheets_pdf/HCV_Guide.pdf