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What is it?

- Hepatitis C is a virus that affects the liver.

Signs and Symptoms

- Most people have no symptoms.
- In some people, the only symptom is fatigue.
- Other symptoms include nausea, vomiting, muscle and joint aches, abdominal (stomach) pain and weight loss.

How do you get it?

- Hepatitis C is found in infected blood.
- **Common ways are:**
 - Receiving blood and/or blood products prior to 1990
 - Sharing any equipment for injecting or snorting drugs such as needles, straws, rolled up bills, crack pipes, etc.
- **Less common ways are:**
 - Having sexual contact with a partner infected with Hepatitis C
 - Getting tattoos or body piercings with equipment that is not sterilized
 - Blood contact and/or needlestick injuries (i.e. Healthcare workers)
 - Spouses of people infected with Hepatitis C (through sex and shared personal hygiene articles)
 - A mother who has Hepatitis C can pass it on to her baby during pregnancy or childbirth

- For information on risks for specific people, for example, men who have sex with men, please see www.catie.ca

Testing for Hepatitis C

- There are 2 blood tests that need to be done to diagnose Hepatitis C.
 1. The first test is the **Hep C Antibody test**
 - If this test is “reactive” it means that you have been exposed to the Hepatitis C virus at some point in your life. This test does not tell us if you are currently still infected with Hepatitis C though.
 2. If the Hep C antibody test is reactive, the patient must have the **Hep C Virus RNA test** done
 - This test will determine if you have a viral load, meaning that you have not cleared the infection on your own and you are still currently infected.

Treatment

- There are very successful treatment options available – speak to your doctor about seeing a specialist for this treatment.
- Make sure a doctor is regularly monitoring you and providing you with access to specialists.
- There is no specific diet to follow; eat well and healthy; the Canada Food Guide can be a good resource.
- Restrict/avoid alcohol; it can worsen or speed up liver damage.

- Talk with your doctor before taking “over the counter” medications and herbal supplements as some medications may be hard on the liver.
- Talk about the need for Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccines; if you have Hepatitis C you can receive Hepatitis A and B vaccines free of charge. Talk to your doctor or contact Brant County Health Unit.

For more information:

- Canadian Liver Foundation - www.liver.ca
- www.catie.ca

Hepatitis C is a reportable disease and must be reported to the Local Medical Officer of Health under the Health Protection and Promotion Act.

Complications

- Some people will recover fully from the virus, but most will remain infected for life.
- It is a slow and silent virus that may take 20 or 30 years to cause liver damage.
- Hepatitis C is a major health concern because it can cause long-term liver damage and can be fatal in some cases by causing cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Prevention

- Do not touch or handle blood without wearing gloves.
- Clean blood spills using bleach.
- Practice good basic hygiene; do not share toothbrushes, razors or nail cutters.
- Never share needles or other equipment for injecting drugs or steroids.
- Never share equipment for snorting drugs (e.g. straws, rolled bills, crack pipes, etc.).
- Practice safer sex; always use a condom during sexual intercourse.
- In a long term, one partner relationship, the risk of passing the virus to your partner is low; the risk increases if there is sex causing bleeding, anal sex or sex during a woman’s menstrual period; discuss this with your partner; your partner may want to be tested.