

# HEPATITIS C TREATMENT Factsheet

## for people who inject drugs

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### What is hepatitis C and how common is it?

Hepatitis C is a virus which causes inflammation of the liver. In Australia, 284,000 people have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus, and 212,000 are living with chronic hepatitis C.

- 62% of people who inject drugs have hepatitis C antibodies, indicating that they have been exposed to the hepatitis C virus.

### Is there a vaccination?

- Unfortunately, there is no vaccine available yet for hepatitis C.

### How do you get hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C can be passed on through any form of blood-to-blood contact.

- Over 80% of people living with chronic hepatitis C contracted it from sharing unsterile drug injecting equipment
- Other transmission risks include unsterile body art or piercings, blood transfusions prior to 1990, accidental exposure in healthcare settings, and mother-to-child transmission
- As there are very high rates of hepatitis C in Australian prisons, people who have spent any time in prison are at increased risk of having contracted hepatitis C.

### How will I know if I have chronic hepatitis C and how serious is it?

- Chronic hepatitis C is a slowly progressing, but very serious liver disease. If left untreated it can cause severe liver disease and cancer

- The only way to know if you have hepatitis C is to get tested. People with chronic hepatitis C may not experience significant symptoms for many years
- Symptoms of liver disease include tiredness, abdominal pain, nausea and loss of appetite.

### Is there an effective treatment for chronic hepatitis C?

- **Treatment for hepatitis C has improved significantly in the last ten years**
- 80% of people with genotype 2 or 3 can achieve a cure following 24 weeks of treatment
- 50% of people with genotype 1 or 4 can achieve a cure following 48 weeks of treatment
- **If you currently inject drugs, you can achieve the same outcomes as anyone else on treatment.**

### What does hepatitis C treatment involve?

- Hepatitis C treatment involves a combination of weekly injections with interferon and daily tablets of Ribavirin
- For some people, the side effects of treatment can be significant, and they need increased support during this time

To speak to somebody about hepatitis C  
call **1300 437 222 (1300 HEP ABC)**

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- To have the best chance of success, people undergoing treatment need to be at a stage in their life when they are able to prioritise their health over other concerns, and reliably take their prescribed medications (take 80% of their medications 80% of the time) and have access to support.
- The treatment criteria have changed significantly over the last 10 years and not all GPs may be aware of the changes. A liver biopsy is no longer needed to access treatment. **People who currently inject drugs, or are on bupe or methadone are eligible for treatment.**

### Am I eligible for government-funded treatment?

- Government-funded treatment is available to people with a Medicare card
- Hepatitis C treatment is listed as highly specialised drugs under section 100 of the National Health Act, and must be prescribed by specialists or GPs who have been specifically trained as prescribers of hepatitis C treatment
- To be eligible for treatment, you must be over 18 years old and have documented chronic hepatitis C infection and compensated liver disease. You must not be pregnant or breast-feeding, and both you and your partner must use two effective forms of contraception (as the treatment can cause birth defects)

### What can people with chronic hepatitis C do to look after their liver health?

- Stay in contact with your GP and have regular tests even if you feel well
- Talk to your doctor before taking any herbal or complementary medicines, as some are very harmful to the liver
- Exercise, and eat a healthy diet to help you maintain a normal body weight
- Avoid alcohol and tobacco.

For more information about viral hepatitis visit [www.hepatitisaustralia.com](http://www.hepatitisaustralia.com) or call 1300 437 222

For further information about hepatitis C treatment for people who inject drugs visit the AIVL website - hepatitis C program [www.aivl.org.au/page\\_display.asp?pid=40program](http://www.aivl.org.au/page_display.asp?pid=40program)

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