

Hepatitis factsheet: Disclosure



For more information about anything in this factsheet, phone the Hepatitis Infoline on 1800 803 990 or go to www.hep.org.au

Introduction

Perhaps the time has come when you are considering telling someone you have hepatitis B (hep B) or hepatitis C (hep C). They may be a friend, family member, your employer, a health care worker or potential partner who you are worried about telling.

At the moment you're probably concerned about what to say, how to tell them, and what their reaction will be. These feelings are perfectly normal and are experienced by many people when they are preparing to tell others that they have hepatitis.

It is important to remember that you have control over who you choose to tell. You may choose not to tell some people about your hepatitis, and this is your right. Your choice not to tell others is your own and should be respected.

Being treated and cured of your hep C means other people around you are no longer at any risk of catching the virus. People who are cured of hep C may feel it even less necessary to tell other people.

Who do I have to tell?

Hepatitis B

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis B it is important to tell people who may have been exposed, so that they can get tested.

Tests can show if you are infectious. People with whom you have had unprotected sex or shared needles with need to see a doctor immediately in case they need immunoglobulin. Family members and housemates may also be at risk of infection if they are not immune, and should be vaccinated to help stop the spread of the virus.

Your doctor or sexual health clinic can help you identify who may be at risk and help contact them. If you wish, your doctor can make the contact for you, while also keeping your identity confidential.

If you are a health care worker you should ensure that you do not pass hepatitis B on to patients. Speak to your doctor, professional body or your employer. Further information is available in the policy *Management of health care workers with a blood borne virus and those doing exposure prone procedures* (Ministry of Health, June 2019).

If someone you are going to have sex with asks if you have hep B, you legally have to tell them, before you have sex, or you need to walk away if you don't want to disclose. If you don't tell a sexual partner about having hep B when asked, this may mean your partner has not consented to the sexual activity, and you may be charged with sexual assault.

Hepatitis C

There are only a small number of situations in which you need tell people that you have or ever had hep C:

- People must inform the blood bank in pre-blood donation questionnaires (because you cannot donate blood if you have hep C or had it in the past)
- Men must also disclose when they seek to donate sperm
- Some insurance policies (particularly life insurance) require that you disclose any infections, disabilities, or illnesses that might influence the insurance company's decision to insure you. Income protection insurance may also fall into this category
- If you are a member of the Australian Defence Force (Navy, Army, Air Force) and you have hep C, you must disclose this. You may be required to leave the forces if you have hep C, although this is determined on a case-by-case basis
- If you are in competition boxing or martial arts.
- The only people who have to tell their employers are health care workers who have hep C and who are involved in 'exposure prone procedures'. In these cases you are obliged to inform your employer of your hepatitis C PCR status. HCV positive health care workers should refer to guidelines from their state or territory health authority on the performance of exposure prone procedures – see *Management of health care workers with a blood borne virus and those doing exposure prone procedures* (NSW Ministry of Health, June 2019).

When should I tell someone that I have hepatitis?

If you have only recently found out that you have hepatitis it may be worth waiting a while before you tell many people about it. It may take you some time to adjust to the new diagnosis and to decide who you want to tell.

However, if someone you are going to have sex with asks if you have hep B, you legally have to tell them, before you have sex, or you need to walk away if you don't want to disclose.

Where and when?

There are better times than others to raise the topic. It is important that you have the discussion when both of you are able to give the subject plenty of time and attention. Also, try to choose a place where you feel comfortable and safe. Some people take the phone off the hook and talk about it over a quiet dinner. Others like to choose a more public place such as a restaurant or park so the person can feel free to go and think about things alone.

What should I say?

First of all, remember that this is not a confession. You are simply sharing with someone some new information about yourself.

It is a good idea to practise the situation with a person you have already told. If you have not told anyone yet, you may want to practise with a counsellor or even in front of the mirror. Having practised it out loud can make the world of difference when it comes to the real situation.

When you practise, plan what you are going to say and how you are going to say it. You might want to write down some points that you don't want to forget. Try to be natural and spontaneous, and speak calmly and clearly. If you do practise with a friend don't let the response always be calm and understanding. It is important that you are prepared for all situations.

Conversation starters

Here are some ideas about how to raise the subject. Remember these are only ideas to get you started. Make sure you say what feels comfortable and right for you.

“I’ve got something I’d like to chat with you about, last year I found out that I have hep B. Can we talk about it now?”

“I feel as though we are really starting to get to know each other and I would like to tell you something personal. I have a virus called hep B, do you know much about it?”

“You know how you were telling me last week about your little secret? Well I have one too I’d like to chat about.”

Hepatitis – basic facts

When you decide to tell someone that you have hep B or hep C, they are likely to ask you questions about it. It is important that you are able to answer these questions yourself, or to have some literature on hand that can help you give the answers. This will make it easier for both of you. Contact the *Hepatitis Infoline* for information resources that will cover most aspects of hepatitis.

It might be useful to have handy the phone number of the *Hepatitis Infoline* so the person you’re telling can phone for telephone information and support.

Outcomes

Different people will react differently when you tell them you have hepatitis. Some may be very concerned for you. Some may find your news perfectly normal and offer you support. Others, however, may respond fearfully or belittle you.

If the outcome is a negative one, it is not a reflection on you and you are not responsible for their reaction. People might be ignorant about hep B or hep C. This is why it is a good idea to have up to date and accurate information on hand. You might want to encourage them to phone the *Hepatitis Infoline* or a counsellor.

It may take some people a little time to take in the information you have just shared with them. Remember that you also may have had many different thoughts, feelings, and questions when you found out that you had hepatitis.

Whatever the outcome, give yourself a pat on the back because you have achieved a task that many people find difficult.

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This factsheet was developed by Hepatitis NSW. It was reviewed by the Hepatitis NSW Medical and Research Advisory Panel.

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