

An artistic illustration featuring two hands clasped together in a supportive grip. The hands are positioned in the foreground, with the fingers interlaced. Behind them, a vibrant cityscape with various buildings and a winding path through green hills is visible under a soft, hazy sky. A large tree trunk is on the left side of the frame. The overall style is soft and illustrative, conveying a sense of care and community.

H e p a t i t i s C

A guide for
family and
friends



Pharmaceuticals

When someone you know has hepatitis C

If you're reading this booklet, chances are someone you care about has hepatitis C. **You can help** that person a great deal by learning as much as you can about this disease and by offering the support your loved one needs. This booklet will help you to do just that—it includes information about hepatitis C; how people who have it may feel; how it's treated; and ideas about how you can help.

Be sure to look on the back cover for information about some organizations that can also help you learn more about hepatitis C.

Just what is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is one of the many types of hepatitis caused by a virus that damages the liver. It's mainly a blood-borne virus, which means that it's passed from person to person when infected blood comes in contact with noninfected blood. It is also possible to contract hepatitis C from infected body fluids, although transmission through body fluids is much less likely to happen.

Some ways contact can happen include

- Blood transfusions (before July 1992), operations, and infected blood products
- Intravenous drug use (past or present—even one-time use)
- Tattooing and body piercing
- Occupational, eg, needlestick and dental treatment
- Needles, dialysis equipment, and other medical equipment
- Transmission from mother to child during birth
- Shared personal hygiene items (such as razors, toothbrushes, nail files)
- Intramucosally (that is, through the tissues lining body openings) when taking cocaine and other drugs
- Sexual activity that involves contact with infected blood or body fluids
- Acupuncture

About 10% of people with hepatitis C don't know how they got the virus.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

As with any illness, people experience hepatitis C symptoms in different ways. Some people feel very sick, while others will feel just fine. Many people with hepatitis C go a very long time—as long as 20 years or more—without symptoms.

Symptoms, when present, may include

- **Aches:** Flu-like illness; joint pain; general weakness or feeling tired
- **Nutritional:** Loss of appetite; blood-sugar disorders
- **Gastrointestinal:** Indigestion; diarrhea
- **Psychological:** Depression; mood swings; mental fatigue
- **Sleep:** Irregular or poor sleep quality, not feeling rested after sleep

It's important for family and friends to remember that most of these symptoms are actually hard to see. But just because hepatitis C sufferers *look* okay, doesn't mean they're feeling well.

What do I need to know about depression?

Finding out you have a serious disease, feeling sick, and sometimes even taking certain hepatitis C therapies can cause depression. While feeling "blue" is not unusual, if depression seems to linger, it's important to get your family member or friend to talk with a doctor.

Be on the lookout for the following symptoms of depression:

- Low energy, fatigue, lack of interest in usual activities
- Withdrawn and/or irritable behavior
- Changes in sleeping patterns (such as sleeping less or more than usual, waking up a lot, not feeling rested)
- Significant weight loss over a short period of time
- Loss of appetite, food doesn't taste good
- Tearfulness, breaking into tears for no apparent reason
- Thinking and talking about suicide, feeling that life is not worth living
- Feeling helpless, hopeless, and that things won't get better
- Reluctance to resume relationship activities after diagnosis or appearance of symptoms (for example, not getting along with family if they always have before; not resuming sexual relations with partner after a reasonable length of time; isolating oneself from others)

You can help your friend or family member by lending an understanding ear and trying to lift that person's spirits during difficult times. **But, remember, if you're worried that the depression is severe or lingers, it's always best to get professional help.**

Treatment for Hepatitis C

Your family member or friend may take medication to help reduce the hepatitis C virus and prevent or lessen liver damage. Here's some information about these treatments.

Interferon: Alpha-interferon and alpha-interferon-based injectable therapies are the gold standards for treating hepatitis C. Interferon helps the immune system stop the hepatitis C virus from multiplying, and it also helps the body get rid of infected cells while preventing healthy cells from being infected.

The usual length of treatment with interferon is 24 to 48 weeks. Some forms of alpha interferon are injected 3 times per week. However, *pegylated alpha interferon*—which uses an advanced technology—needs to be injected only once a week.

Alpha interferons can cause side effects. Some side effects can occur more often than others, and some may be more severe than others. The most common side effects include headache, fatigue, fever, nausea, muscle pain, and sleeplessness. Alpha interferons have also been known to cause more severe side effects including new or worsening mental health problems such as depression, trouble breathing, chest pain, high fever or worsening of psoriasis. These disorders generally resolve after stopping therapy.

Ribavirin: Ribavirin is a pill form of a medication that's sometimes used with alpha interferon to help it work better. **Ribavirin may cause birth defects and/or death of the unborn child. If ribavirin is prescribed, extreme care must be taken to avoid pregnancy in female patients and female partners of male patients.**

Ribavirin therapy has also been associated with a blood disorder called anemia, which may result in a worsening of heart disease.

People who take these medications sometimes feel worse before they feel better. It is also possible that people may not realize how side effects are affecting them or their relationship with others.

If side effects occur, be sure to encourage your friend or family member to talk with their doctor. It's very important that patients with hepatitis C continue with therapy in order to have the best chance of getting better.

What you can do

People often feel helpless when someone they care about has a serious illness. But the fact that you've taken the time to read this booklet shows how much you care about the friend or family member you know with hepatitis C. And, that's great, because you **can** play a major role in helping that person better cope with hepatitis C.

The best things you can do are to learn about hepatitis C, help out with daily chores and activities, and provide emotional support. Ask how the person is feeling, encourage following the doctor's advice, and ask what you can do to help. Remember, some people really need or would appreciate help—even if they don't ask for it. These may seem like small things, but they can make a world of difference.

Hepatitis C information resources

American Liver Foundation

75 Maiden Lane, Suite 603
New York, NY 10038
(800) GO-LIVER (465-4837)
(888) 4-HEP-ABC (443-7222)
<http://www.liverfoundation.org>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
(888) 4-HEP-CDC (443-7232)
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis>

Hepatitis Foundation International

504 Blick Drive
Silver Spring, MD 20904-2901
(800) 891-0707
(301) 622-4200
<http://www.hepfi.org>

Hep C Connection

1177 Grant Street, Suite 200
Denver, CO 80203
(800) 522-HEPC (4372)
(303) 860-0800
<http://www.hepc-connection.org>

HIV and Hepatitis.com

P.O. Box 14288
San Francisco, CA 94114
<http://www.hivandhepatitis.com>

National AIDS Treatment Advocacy Project (NATAP)

580 Broadway, Suite 1010
New York, NY 10012
(888) 26-NATAP (62827)
(212) 219-0106
<http://www.natap.org>

National Hepatitis C Coalition, Inc.

P.O. Box 5058
Hemet, CA 92544
National Hepline: (909) 658-4414
<http://www.nationalhepatitis-c.org>

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