

# HEPATITIS C

in the **Workplace**



# HEPATITIS C

## Basics

The word “hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis can be caused by alcohol, medication or other chemicals, auto-immune conditions or viruses. Viruses are small organisms that can cause disease. There are many different types of viruses that cause hepatitis and it is possible to be infected with more than one at the same time. Each type of virus is completely different; all are prevented and transmitted differently and can cause different symptoms. This booklet focuses on hepatitis C (Hep C).

### Hepatitis C

**Hepatitis C** is transmitted only through blood-to-blood contact. Twenty percent of people who come in contact with the virus will get rid of it through their body’s natural immune functioning. The remaining eighty percent will develop chronic (long-term) hepatitis C. For those who do experience illness, it can take many years for symptoms to develop. Chronic hepatitis C can cause liver cirrhosis (heavy scarring of the liver) for a smaller percentage of those infected. While there is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C, there are treatments available that are helping more and more people clear the virus.

### Other hepatitis viruses

**Hepatitis A** is transmitted through the fecal-oral route. This means that it is often caught by eating food or drinking water that is contaminated with the feces (stool) of a hepatitis A-infected person. As such, hepatitis A is a concern within the food industry. There is a vaccine available to prevent hepatitis A. Once someone’s immune system clears the virus, he or she cannot catch it again.

**Hepatitis B** is found in the blood, saliva, vaginal fluid or semen of an infected person. It can be transmitted through unprotected sexual contact, human bites and blood to-blood contact. Ninety percent of people infected with hepatitis B clear the virus from their system without treatment. There is a vaccine available to prevent hepatitis B.

**Hepatitis D, E and G are not common in Canada.**



# Transmission

The hepatitis C virus is transmitted only through blood-to-blood contact. In order for the virus to be passed on, blood from an infected person must enter the bloodstream of another person.

## A person can get infected with Hep C by:

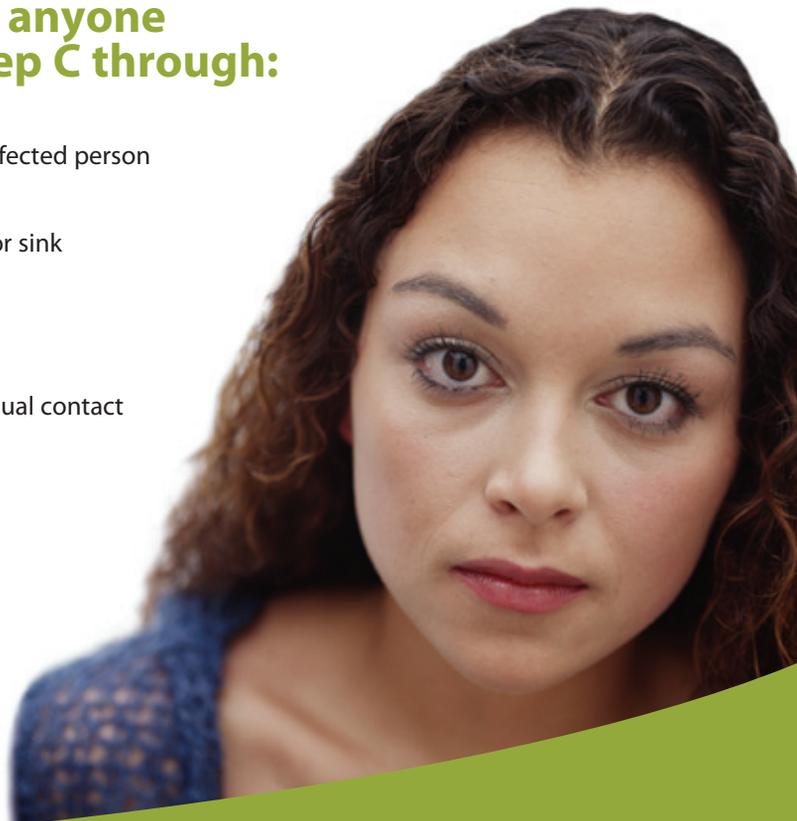
- sharing equipment to prepare, inject or ingest drugs (needles, water, cookers, filters, tourniquets, acidifiers, swabs, pipes, bills or straws)
- sharing body piercing equipment, tattoo equipment, tattoo ink or acupuncture needles
- sharing personal grooming supplies (razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers or tweezers)
- accidental occupational exposure (being poked by a needle or other sharp object that has infected blood on it)

Sexual transmission of Hep C is rare, but there is still some risk during vaginal or anal sex without a condom when blood is present.

Some Canadians were infected with Hep C through blood transfusions before improved screening tests were introduced in 1992. Since then, blood safety has become a top priority and the World Health Organization has said that Canada's blood system is among the safest in the world.

## There is no evidence that anyone has been infected with Hep C through:

- sharing eating utensils, dishes or glasses
- consuming food or drinks prepared by an infected person
- being coughed or sneezed on
- using the same bathroom or toilet, shower or sink
- sharing water fountains or coffee pots
- sharing office supplies, computers, tools, telephones, desks or clothes
- shaking hands, hugging, kissing or other casual contact
- swimming in public pools



# HEPATITIS C in the Workplace



Since Hep C is not spread through ordinary workplace activities, in most situations there is no legal duty to disclose one's Hep C status at work. If an employee chooses to disclose his or her status to an employer, the employer is obliged to keep this information confidential. Legally, the employer cannot disclose information about an employee's Hep C status (or other personal medical information) to third parties (other employees, other employers, etc.) without the employee's consent. It is up to the person with Hep C to decide whether to tell co-workers.

Some people consider Hep C an "episodic disability." Episodic disabilities are long-term medical conditions characterized by periods of good health interrupted by periods of illness. These periods of wellness and illness may vary in frequency, severity and duration from one person to another. Multiple sclerosis, lupus, arthritis, diabetes, HIV/AIDS and some forms of cancer and mental illness are also considered episodic disabilities.

People living with an episodic disability often deal with a number of issues that can have an impact on their work life. They may experience difficulties related to medication (such as side effects and complicated treatment and scheduling regimens). They may need to attend frequent medical appointments, sometimes on short notice. Employers and fellow employees may not understand, or may be fearful of, Hep C or other episodic disabilities. Because of this, traditional workplace schedules, policies and programs may not meet the needs of people living with episodic disabilities.

Employers consider it important for all employees to meet performance standards and to be mentally and physically able to perform the essential duties of their work in a safe, efficient and reliable manner. Many people with Hep C can live with the virus for up to 20 years without symptoms and can perform their duties the same as any other employee.

## When Hep C becomes an issue...

Hep C may become an issue if an employee who is infected with the virus begins to experience symptoms of liver disease. These symptoms include extreme fatigue, muscle, joint or abdominal discomfort, loss of appetite and weight loss, sleep disturbance and depression. Job performance may be hindered by these symptoms if the employee is not able to carry out their required work tasks or has to take medical leave.

Another challenge facing an employee living with Hep C is the decision to undergo treatment. Treatment for Hep C can last up to a year and can cause many side effects including nausea, flu-like symptoms, hair loss, fatigue and depression. In some cases, these side effects can be so difficult that people take medical leave from work.

If an employee realizes that his or her work is—or will be—affected by illness, he or she should consider asking the employer to accommodate the disability. When an employee requests accommodation, he or she does not have to disclose the health condition or illness. For more information about accommodation of disability, see the section on HEPATITIS C and Human Rights, on page 6.

## Workplace insurance coverage and claims

Even though an employee is not required to disclose their Hep C status to anyone in the workplace, physicians may need to reveal the condition to disability insurance companies as part of the application process for benefits. An employee who needs to take medical leave will need to notify supervisors but is not required to disclose the exact cause of the medical leave.

When an employee submits an insurance claim, sometimes the paperwork will pass through the workplace human resources personnel before it is sent to the insurer. In order to protect confidentiality, an employee may wish to submit claims directly to the insurance company.

If an employee feels he or she cannot handle full-time work and is considering switching to part-time hours, it is a good idea for them to consult with their insurance company beforehand. Employees may find that the benefits from a part-time income are much less than they would be if they had been applied for as a full-time employee.

All insurance companies have strict policies regarding the confidentiality of client information and are required by law to keep claim information private. Insurance companies must have written permission from the client to discuss medical information with anyone who works outside of the insurance company. Employees should note that application forms for disability benefits may contain consent clauses that allow the employer and the insurance company to share information about an employee's medical condition and ability to work.



# HEPATITIS C and Human Rights

In Canada, the federal, provincial and territorial governments have anti-discrimination laws that protect people from harassment and discrimination based on a disability. For example, the Canadian Human Rights Act states: *“For all purposes of this Act, the prohibited grounds of discrimination are race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and conviction for which a pardon has been granted.”*

The Act also states that: *“It is a discriminatory practice, directly or indirectly, (a) to refuse to employ or continue to employ any individual, or (b) in the course of employment, to differentiate adversely in relation to an employee on a prohibited ground of discrimination.”*

Hepatitis C infection and liver disease caused by Hep C are disabilities under Canadian anti-discrimination law. Under this law, employers have a duty to provide accommodation to employees who have a disability. In plain terms, accommodation means leveling the playing field by removing workplace barriers – whether these barriers are physical, institutional or attitudinal – so that disabled employees have the same level of opportunity as non-disabled employees and can perform the essential duties of their job effectively. Some examples of how an employer might accommodate an employee with a disability include:

- allowing an employee to work flexible hours so he or she can go for medical appointments during regular business hours
- allowing an employee to work from home on days when he or she is too fatigued to come to the office
- installing a wheelchair entrance so that an employee in a wheelchair or motorized scooter can get into the workplace

The most appropriate accommodation is one that most respects the dignity of the person with a disability, meets individual needs, ensures confidentiality and best promotes integration and full participation in the workplace.

An employee living with Hep C who needs accommodation in order to continue working or to return to work, has a responsibility to cooperate with his or her employer. This may mean informing their employers of their needs, obtaining necessary information including medical or other expert opinions, participating in discussions about work duties and working with the employer on an ongoing basis to manage the accommodation process.

An employer’s duty to accommodate is very strict, but it is not unlimited. An employer does not have to accommodate an employee with a disability if the employer can prove that it has acted in good faith for a purpose connected to the job and that accommodating the employee would cause the employer “undue hardship.” To claim undue hardship, the employer must show that either an accommodation would cost too much money (to the extent that the cost would fundamentally change the nature of the business or its ability to continue operating), or that the accommodation would create an unsafe workplace.

Many people were infected with Hep C through drug use and sharing injection drug equipment. As a result, some people may think that people with Hep C are “drug addicts” and treat them in a stigmatizing or discriminatory manner. Fortunately, human rights law considers dependence on or addiction to drugs or alcohol a “disability,” and protects from discrimination and harassment based on an addiction, whether it is ongoing, in the past or even just perceived.



Anti-discrimination law may not fully protect an employee with a disability when dealing with employment-related insurance. Often, exceptions in the law will permit employers and insurance companies to exclude employees with disabilities from particular insurance coverage or benefits, either altogether or for a certain period of time.

For more detailed information about human rights and Hep C as a disability in your province or territory, consult provincial legislation or provincial human rights commissions, or talk to a lawyer. Additional information can also be found at the Canadian Human Rights Commission website: [www.chrc-ccdp.ca](http://www.chrc-ccdp.ca).

## HEPATITIS C

# Precautions

### Food Preparation

Transmission of Hep C does not occur through oral ingestion or food-borne contamination. As such, Hep C does not pose a danger to health in kitchens, restaurants or other premises where food is prepared. In all workplaces where food is handled or prepared, however, employers and employees should take the following precautions:

- Discard food that has had blood spilled on it, regardless of who the blood came from.
- Practice proper hand-washing and safe food-handling techniques to prevent the transmission of other bacteria or viruses (such as Hep A).

For more information, please talk to your local health unit about food preparation.

### First Aid

Hep C is transmitted through blood-to-blood contact. Follow universal precautions when possible and think of the following:

- All workplaces should be equipped with first aid kits that contain a pair of gloves, latex barriers and mouth guards to protect both the person giving and the person receiving first aid.
- First aid should be administered without delay.
- Workplace accidents should be reported to a supervisor as soon as possible.



# HEPATITIS C

## Universal Precautions, Routine Practices and Infection Control

Universal precautions (aka routine practices) are a set of strategies that help prevent the spread of Hep C and other infections. Because viruses can be transmitted through bodily fluids and because often you can't tell by looking at someone whether or not they are infected with a virus, universal precautions treat all blood and bodily fluids as having the potential to transmit an infection. This protects people with Hep C, their coworkers and their healthcare providers from being exposed to many different infections.

### The following universal precautions should be put into practice in the workplace:

- 1 Bandage all cuts right away to avoid blood-to-blood contact; ensure that all first aid kits are stocked with the required amount and type of equipment as outlined in the Occupational Health and Safety standards that apply to your workplace.
- 2 Clean blood and other body fluids using a freshly-mixed solution of 1 part bleach, 9 parts water.
- 3 Wear non-porous (latex, rubber or vinyl) gloves when cleaning up items soiled with blood or other body fluids. Remove the gloves after cleaning and before leaving the affected area. If a glove tears, remove it as soon as possible, wash up and get a new pair.
- 4 Dispose of gloves and other materials used to clean up blood or other body fluids in a durable bag that can be tied off.
- 5 If there is a risk of splash or spray when cleaning up blood or bodily fluids, use protective gear such as disposable plastic aprons, masks and eye shields.
- 6 Put sharp items into a solid, sealable container so they won't puncture garbage bags.
- 7 Wash your hands with soap and hot water for at least 20 seconds after you have had contact with blood or other body fluids, after going to the bathroom, before preparing or eating food and after removing gloves.
- 8 Use hand lotion to help keep the skin on your hands from becoming chapped or broken. Intact skin is your first defence against infection!
- 9 Flush eyes, nose or mouth with water if exposed to another person's blood or body fluid and seek medical advice immediately.

Universal precautions work best as part of a workplace strategy to prevent Hep C and other blood-borne infections. A comprehensive strategy can also include:

- Administrative procedures that prevent exposure (the establishment of a safety committee, procedures for reporting accidents and near accidents, staff training on universal precautions, etc.)
- Modifications to the workplace and/or workplace equipment that prevent exposure (safer sharps, sharp disposal bins, etc.)

The details of this strategy should be relevant to your specific workplace.

# Workplace Policy

**A good way to address Hep C in the workplace is to develop workplace policies and procedures that promote proactive, principled human resources management and an educated and empowered workforce.**

## **Workplace policy on Hep C should include:**

- the employee's right to confidentiality of their personal health information
- the employee's right to work as long as his or her health allows it
- the employee's right to workplace accommodations
- the responsibilities of the employer, the employee and co-workers
- the employee's eligibility for benefits
- the company's responsibility for educating employees about Hep C, including the risks of transmission
- the steps the company will take to provide a supportive environment for people with Hep C or other episodic, chronic or life-threatening medical conditions
- references to relevant legislation and related workplace policies

## **A sample policy statement**

Here is an example of a policy statement that outlines how some of these components can be adopted or included in existing policies:

*(Name of organization) believes that employees infected with hepatitis C are valued employees who do not pose a health risk to others in the workplace. Employees living with hepatitis C are encouraged to remain productive at work as long as possible. They will receive the support and consideration of the employer, and will not be subjected to any discriminatory practices. An employee's hepatitis C status and details of his or her medical condition will be kept strictly confidential.*

**No employee or candidate for employment will be required to take a test for hepatitis C infection.**

## **Education**

*(Organization name) will provide education on hepatitis C prevention for all employees, with the support of the (name of responsible unit in organization or the local public health unit or community organization). Confidential referrals to other agencies and on-site educational resources are available through (title of responsible person in the organization).*

# HEPATITIS C

# Workplace Policy

(continued)

## Support to the employee

For employees who are, or may become, infected with hepatitis C or any other chronic or life-threatening disease, (organization's name) will:

- ensure confidentiality of their personal health information
- ensure continued employment as long as the employee is able to perform the essential duties of his or her job
- provide reasonable accommodation of the employee's disability to the point of undue hardship
- ensure continued coverage under the terms and conditions of the current benefits package and (name of organization) personnel policies (and, if applicable, collective agreement)
- provide a supportive workplace environment that responds to hepatitis C as it would to any long-term chronic illness
- prohibit discrimination in the workplace
- post information indicating who employees should contact within the workplace if they feel harassed or discriminated against due to their condition

## Informing the employer

- An employee is under no obligation to disclose to their employer that he or she is living with hepatitis C.
- An employer is required by law to keep employees' medical information confidential. It is up to the employee to decide whether or not to disclose details of his or her medical condition to co-workers.
- An employee who has an illness or disability should inform his or her supervisor when he or she is no longer able to perform the essential duties of his or her job.
- An employee who has an illness or disability may request accommodation of his or her disability. A supervisor may need information about the employee's capacity to work and workplace limitations and restrictions, in order to accommodate an employee's disability.
- An employee wishing to claim income replacement (short-term or long-term disability) benefits or extended health benefits will be required to provide the medical and other information requested by the insurance company.

**For more copies of this brochure or other documents on hepatitis C, contact:**

CATIE – Canada's Source for HIV and Hepatitis C Information  
www.hepCinfo.ca – www.catie.ca – 1-800-263-1638 - info@catie.ca  
505-555 Richmond St W, Toronto, ON, Canada, M5V 3B1

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# Notes

