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issue three **hepCinfo** A handy mix of hepatitis C information

Thinking about Hep C treatment?

8 questions to ask yourself before you start

Starting treatment is a big decision. Your physical health is one of the main factors you and your doctor will consider when thinking about treatment.

Another important factor is whether you are ready to start and to stay on treatment. Even though Hep C treatment is only for a set time, the more you can stick to treatment and take all your doses at the right time and in the right way, the better your chances of clearing the virus.

Getting your life as stable as you can and finding support will help you manage treatment. You may need some time to put the right supports in place before you start treatment. Below is a list of questions that can help as you think about treatment:

How is your physical health?
Your doctor will do tests to determine how much damage hepatitis C has caused to your liver. Other health issues that could cause liver damage or affect your ability to manage treatment will also help you and your doctor decide when to start treatment.

It is best to start treatment early, before you feel sick. This can be hard because you feel OK, but Hep C can damage your body even while you feel well. Starting treatment sooner than later increases your chances of staying healthy.

How is your emotional health?
If you feel down a lot or have a history of depression, talk to your doctor about your options before you start treatment for Hep C because it can cause depression in some people. Starting antidepressant medication before you go on Hep C treatment can prevent depression and make it easier to stay on treatment.

Do you have the support you need?
Some people who use drugs find they can handle treatment better when they have a support group and a team of health workers to support them. Check with an AIDS service organization (ASO) or health centre about getting connected to a support group or a care team. Other people on treatment, family and friends can also help support you through the treatment process.

Do you have spiritual or religious support if you need it?
Some people find that their spiritual or religious beliefs help them to cope as they start treatment. Are there people whom you want to support you as you start treatment, such as an Aboriginal Elder, an imam, a priest, a rabbi or other religious leader?

Do you have a plan to stick to your meds?
Think about what might help you or stop you from sticking to the medication schedule. Before you start treatment, you could practice your medication schedule with Smarties, jelly beans or other candies to get in the habit of taking them and to help you figure out any possible problems you might have.

If you use street drugs, you may want to change when you use drugs so that you can take your meds at the same time every day. Or maybe you need a place to keep your meds. Talk to your doctor, another healthcare worker or a peer worker about any possible problems and for tips on how to stick to treatment.

Do you have a place to stay?
It can be easier to stick to treatment if you have a place to live. If you don't have housing, is there a family member or friend you can stay with while you're starting or taking treatment? A peer or social worker may also be able to help you access housing.

If you can't find housing, it is still possible to go on Hep C treatment. You will need to find a place to store your medications, like a needle exchange program or a health centre. Or you may be able to pick up your medication each day at the pharmacy.

Do you need help covering the cost of treatment?
Hep C drugs are expensive; however there are programs that will cover the costs of medications if you meet the qualifications.

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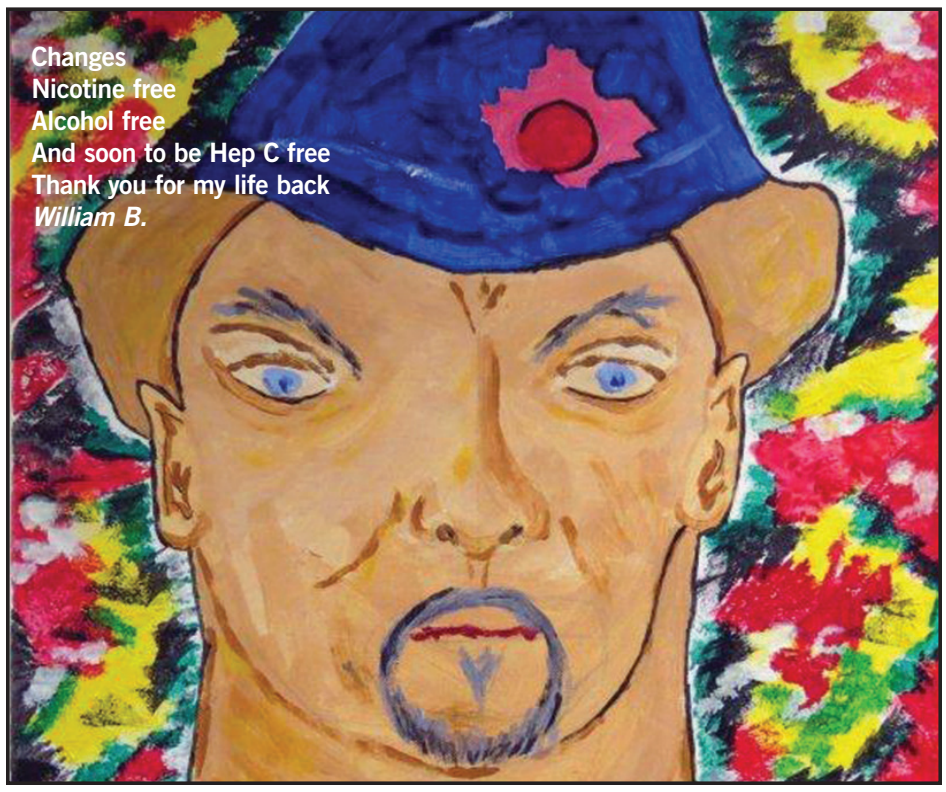

illustration: William B., Toronto Community Hep C Program

WHAT IS TREATMENT FOR HEP C?

The main goal of Hep C treatment is to clear the Hep C virus from the body.

For a long time, Hep C treatment has included a combination of two medicines: peg-interferon (pegylated interferon) and ribavirin. For people with genotype 1, sometimes peg-interferon and ribavirin are combined with another medicine. That medicine is either boceprevir (Victrelis) or telaprevir (Incivek). Some people have found these medicines difficult to take because they cause side effects, such as feeling like you have the flu and extreme tiredness.

There are new hepatitis C medicines that are being tested and will be available in the next few years. Some of these medicines will be taken with peg-interferon and ribavirin and some will not be. These new medicines will have fewer side effects, shorter lengths of treatment and will cure more people.

Some of the names of these new medicines are simeprevir (Galexos), sofosbuvir (Sovaldi) and daclatasvir.

Interested in learning more about treatment for Hep C? Talk with a doctor or nurse for more information and to see if treatment could be right for you.

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CATIE Canada's source for HIV and hepatitis C information

555 Richmond Street West, Suite 505, Box 1104 Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5V 3B1

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What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C infection is caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Worldwide, about 170 million people have Hep C. In Canada, about 250,000 people are living with Hep C. Roughly 20% of people don't know they have the virus. You can get Hep C when blood containing the Hep C virus gets into your blood stream.

In Canada, the highest-risk activity for getting Hep C is using drug equipment—needles, syringes, swabs, filters, spoons and water—that has been used by someone else. Taking care to avoid contact with materials that could have blood on them, even if you can't see any blood, will help you stay safe.

The Hep C virus attacks your liver. Located on the right side of your body, under the ribs, the liver performs more than 500 functions that keep us healthy. Your body can try to fight the virus on its own—and sometimes it can win—but the Hep C virus is very strong. Ordinary medicines like antibiotics do not kill viruses. However, there are special medications to treat Hep C that work for many people.

Genotype: 6 types of Hep C
There are at least six different types, or strains, of the Hep C virus. They are called genotypes. The particular genotype a person has will affect his or her treatment decisions.

Stages: Different outcomes of Hep C infection
There are 2 stages of Hep C infection:

1. *Acute infection* happens when people are first infected and can last from a few weeks to six months. Sometimes the body is able to clear the virus on its own during this stage.
2. *Chronic, or long-term, infection* happens when a person has had Hep C for six months or more. Chronic infection is a concern because even though a person may not feel sick, the Hep C virus can still be damaging their liver.

Let's say 10 people have become infected with the Hep C virus. Two of the 10 will recover from the infection, or "clear" the virus on their own, during the acute phase. That means their body fought the Hep C virus and won.

The other eight people will go on to develop chronic Hep C (which means that the Hep C virus is in their blood and liver more than six months after infection). It can take as long as 20 to 30 years for the virus to cause serious liver disease or damage. This damage causes scarring and is called fibrosis.

Of those eight people with chronic infection, one or two will have enough damage to their liver over the years that the liver will not work as well as it should. This is called cirrhosis. If the disease continues to get worse, people can also get liver cancer or liver failure.

Living with Hep C: Show your liver some love!
If you have Hep C, you can take steps to reduce harm and prevent liver damage.

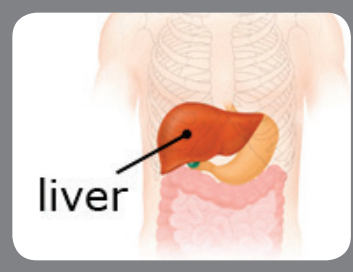
You might:

- see a healthcare provider
- find out about treatment for Hep C
- learn tips for living with Hep C and preventing liver damage—for example, you may choose to drink less alcohol because alcohol can damage your liver even more.

These things can help you stay healthy for a long time with Hep C.

STAGES OF LIVER DAMAGE

For up to **1 out of 4 people** (25%) who become infected with Hep C, the virus goes away on its own during the first six months after infection. **3 out of 4** (75%) go on to develop chronic Hep C and the virus does not go away on its own.



Hep C infection

- The virus goes away on its own
- Chronic Hep C
  - Possible inflammation, fibrosis
    - Possible cirrhosis, liver cancer or liver failure

Just found out you have Hep C or HIV?

Got questions about your risk for Hep C or HIV?

CONNECT WITH CATIE

We'll help in many ways:

- Talk with you about how to manage your health
- Answer your questions about Hep C or HIV treatment
- Send you free educational resources
- Give you information through a confidential, toll-free telephone help line

CATIE
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Hep C testing: how it works

Test 1: Hep C Antibody Test

Negative antibody test (no Hep C antibodies)

The person does not have Hep C.

Positive antibody test (Hep C antibodies in blood)
This does not mean a person has Hep C. A second blood test is required to confirm if a person has Hep C.

Test 2: RNA Blood Test

Negative RNA test (no Hep C RNA in blood)

The person does not have Hep C. Their body has cleared the virus.

Learn more about how to protect yourself from Hep C.

Positive RNA test (Hep C RNA in blood)

The person has Hep C.

People with Hep C have many options. Talk to a health worker to find out more about them.

Say what?

Antibody test – this test looks for antibodies, which are like footprints that the Hep C virus leaves if it has ever been in your body

RNA test – this test looks for the actual virus in your body

Hepatitis C:

A concern among newcomers and immigrants to Canada

Could you have the virus and not know it?

Should you get tested?

How is Hep C treated?

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Bad veins & blood tests

Things that help

Many of the tests for Hep C require blood to be taken. This can be hard if your veins are bad. There are some things you can do to make it easier to have your blood taken:

- Show the health worker which veins are good to draw blood from.
- If you feel comfortable, ask a health worker if there is a person on staff who is good at taking blood from damaged veins.
- Get your body warm. This can make it easier to take blood. Take a hot bath or shower before you go to get a blood test and wear warm clothes to the appointment.
- Drink two to three glasses of water a couple of hours before your blood test. This will make it easier to find a vein.
- If these things feel hard or scary to do, bring a friend, peer worker or harm reduction worker to the appointment with you.
- Try to save a vein for hospital emergencies or blood work.

If you take care of your veins, they can last a long time.

PAINT ME: SELF-PORTRAITS BY PEOPLE LIVING WITH HEP C

The paintings found in this issue of *HepCInfo* are just three of the 36 self-portraits created by people living with hepatitis C who participated in *Paint Me*, a 2013 art project that explored life with the virus from a personal perspective.

Paint Me was part of the Toronto Community Hep C Program, a support program whose goal is to provide people with hepatitis C a chance to get medical care and support in a safe, inclusive environment. Hepatitis C treatment is a large part of the program, with group members at all stages of the treatment journey.

The program regularly includes an art project, which contributes to social connectedness, self-examination, self-expression and healing. Art is also a valuable tool for advocacy and for addressing issues of stigma and discrimination, inequality, poverty and social exclusion.

The process of participating in *Paint Me* allowed each group member to create a unique and beautiful piece of art. Together these 36 self-portraits make a powerful statement about people in the community living with Hep C.

To stay safe, it's best to use new sterile equipment every time you inject drugs. This includes new needles, syringes, cookers, filters, water and swabs. Your tie (tourniquet) does not need to be new every time if you are the only one using it.

Protect yourself and others from Hep C if you inject drugs

Hep C lives in one body fluid: **blood.**

It does not live in spit, tears, cum or vaginal or anal fluids.

For someone to get Hep C, the blood of someone with Hep C has to get into the other person's bloodstream.

Some activities can put people at risk for getting or passing on Hep C. One of those is sharing injection drug use equipment.

Staying safe while injecting drugs

Sharing injection drug use equipment is the main way people get Hep C. Any re-used drug equipment can have invisible amounts of blood carrying Hep C, HIV or Hep B that can infect someone.

To stay safe, it's best to use new sterile equipment every time you inject drugs.

This includes new needles, syringes, cookers, filters, water and swabs. Your tie (tourniquet) does not need to be new every time if you are the only one using it.

Planning ahead: Do you have the equipment you need?

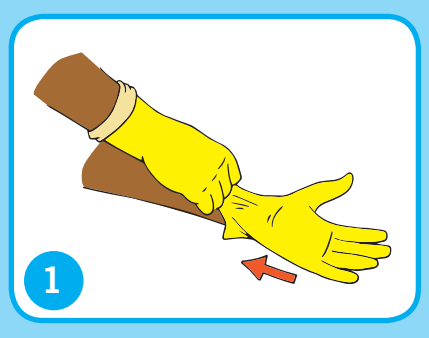
Having new sterile equipment—and enough of it for every time you inject—helps reduce the chance of Hep C passing from one person to another. If you always have extra equipment around, it is easier to avoid situations where you borrow from or share with other people.

Dealing with the pressure to share drug use equipment

If you are injecting in a group, there may be pressure to share equipment. To deal with that pressure, you might:

- Avoid situations where you know sharing happens
- Bring extra new needles and equipment for yourself and other people

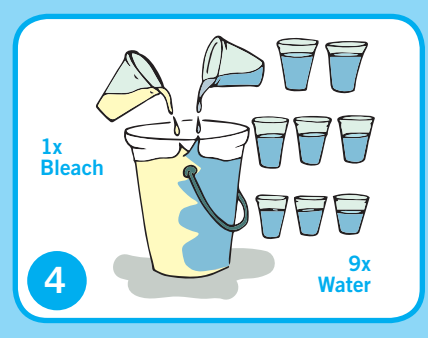
How to clean up blood spills safely



Put on new latex or vinyl gloves.

Carefully collect any sharp objects, such as broken glass, and put them in a sturdy plastic container such as one used for detergent.

Wipe up blood using paper towel or disposable cloths.



Make a solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water.

Cover the area where the blood was with the bleach solution. Let bleach solution sit for 10 minutes (at least).

Wipe up the bleach solution using paper towel or disposable cloths.

Place the paper towel or cloths and gloves into a durable bag and seal it.

Wash hands with lots of soap and water.

- Learn how to safely prepare and inject your drugs yourself, so you'll have more control over when and how you use

Finding a safer space to inject

Some places are safer than others for injecting drugs. Try to pick a place that has a lot of light, running water for washing your hands, and an area to lay out your stuff. Also, if you can, pick a place where you feel safe and won't be interrupted, especially from police, so that you can take as much time as you need to safely inject.

Preparing the space and yourself

Wherever or whatever you inject, being as clean as possible is your best bet for making sure you don't get dirt or germs in your veins. Veins are an entry point for Hep C and other infections such as HIV, Hep B and abscesses.

Whenever possible, wash your hands and the work surface with soap and water. You can also lay down some newspaper to use as a work surface.

It's also important to clean the injection site on your skin with soap and water or an alcohol swab before you inject.

If you're using an alcohol swab wipe in one direction to move dirt and germs away. Wiping in circles just pushes the dirt and germs around in the same place on the skin.

Taking care of your veins

When you inject a lot, your veins can collapse or become hard, making it difficult for you to inject into them. There are a number of steps you can take to help keep your veins healthy:

- **Rotate your injection sites** to give your veins a chance to heal between injections. Avoid injecting into your neck, groin, penis, breasts, eyes and feet. These sites are very dangerous to use because injecting into them can cause serious health problems, like an overdose, abscesses or puncturing an artery.
- **Draw up your drug through a filter** to keep out bits that didn't dissolve. These bits can get in your lungs and cause scarring and breathing problems (chalk lung). Dental filters are best, but if you don't have them you could use some cotton from a Q-tip. Try not to use cigarette filters because they can cause health problems.
- **Use a pinch of vitamin C or citric acid** to dissolve drugs like brown heroin or crack (instead of lemon juice or vinegar, which can damage your veins).
- **Use a tie** (tourniquet) to make the vein more visible.
- **Flag** to make sure you are injecting into a vein.
- **Use a clean tissue or cotton ball** to put pressure on the site after injecting to help stop the bleeding.

Cleaning up after injecting

Put all your used equipment (not just the needles) in a sharps biohazard bin or a hard container that has a lid (such as a detergent bottle, pop bottle or glass bottle). This way, there is less chance of someone else re-using your stuff or getting poked.

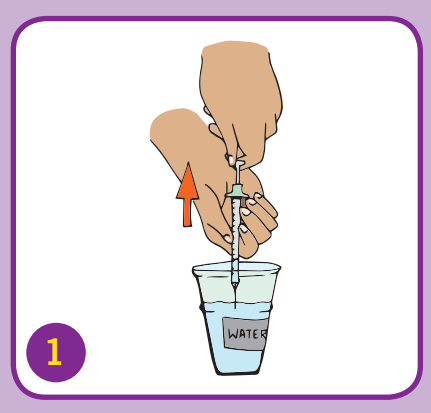
What about when you can't get new needles or other injection equipment?

Living in a place without a needle exchange program can make it hard to get new needles and other injection equipment. There are things you can do to avoid borrowing needles or other injection equipment if you can't get new supplies:

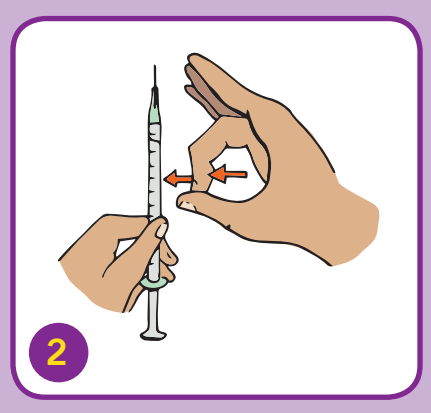
- Consider switching to drugs you can swallow (parachute), eat, smoke or snort until you can get new injection equipment.
- Keep your own needle or syringe to re-use and don't let anyone else use it. Mark it with tape, a marker or nail polish so that you know it is yours. Rinse the needle with cold water after you use it so blood does not dry in the syringe and clog it. (Note: This will not kill Hep C or HIV.)
- Stock up on needles, syringes, cookers, filters, water, swabs and ties when you can get to a harm reduction program.
- If you inhale drugs, stock up on pipes or stems, mouthpieces and screens.
- If you have to borrow used drug injection equipment, clean it with bleach before using it (see How to clean a needle with bleach, below). **The bleach must be undiluted.** This may kill HIV, Hep B and some bacteria but it does not kill Hep C.

How to clean a needle with bleach step-by-step

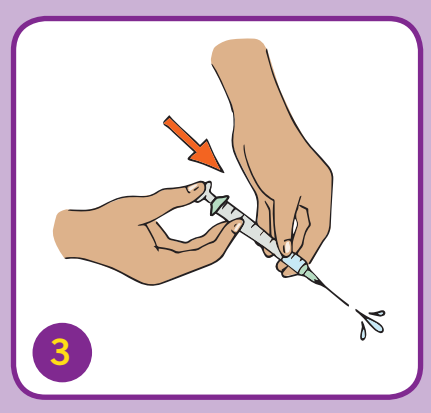
It is safest to use a new needle for every injection. **Cleaning needles with bleach won't kill Hep C but it may kill HIV and Hep B** and may decrease the amount of Hep C in a used needle. If this is your only option it is better than nothing!



Draw up clean water into the syringe.



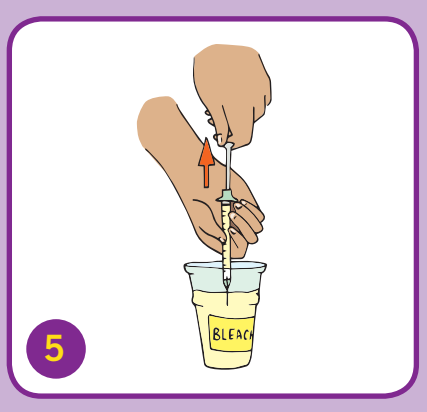
Shake and tap the syringe to loosen blood drops.



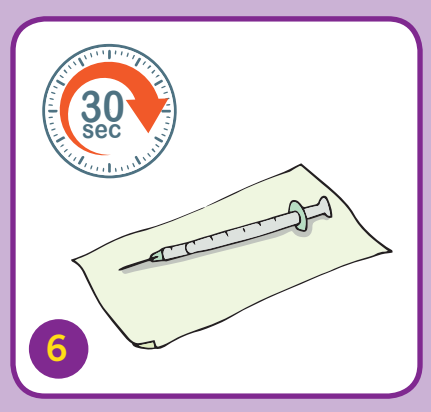
Shoot out the water.

4

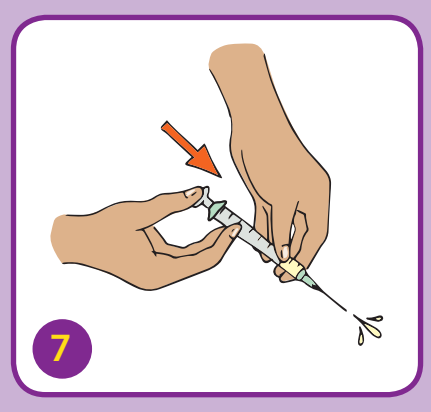
Repeat steps 1, 2 and 3.



Draw up **undiluted bleach** into the syringe. The syringe should be completely filled so bleach touches the entire inside area and bottom of the plunger.



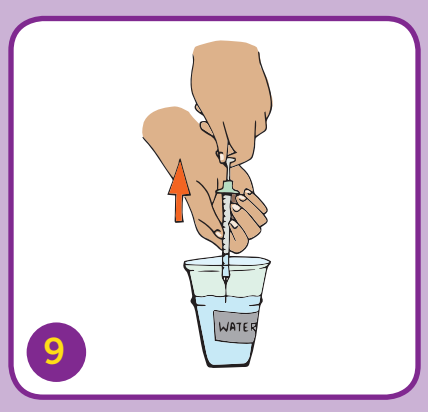
Let sit for 30 seconds (at least).



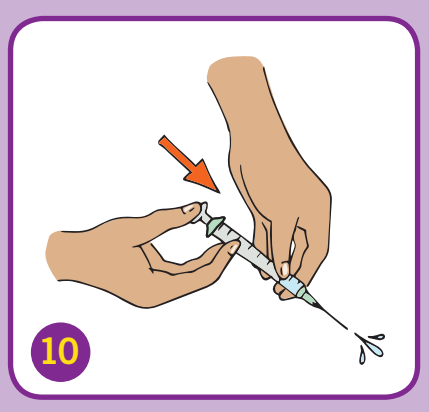
Shoot out the bleach.

8

Repeat steps 5, 6 and 7.



Draw up clean water into the syringe.



Shoot out the water.

Repeat steps 9 and 10.

If you have to re-use a cooker or a spoon, it can be soaked in undiluted bleach for 30 seconds (at least) and then rinsed thoroughly with clean water.

To tell or not to tell?

Some tips for how to start a conversation about having Hep C

If you find out you have Hep C, you may decide that you want to share this news with some people.

You may want to tell:

- Your doctor or nurse, so they can help you take care of your health.
- A friend or family member you trust, so they can support you.
- People you use drugs with, so together you can take steps to stay safe.

In some cases you may want to keep the information private. For example, your landlord, co-worker, shelter staff worker or parole officer does not need to know if you don't want them to know.

When you decide to tell people that you have Hep C, start with people you trust, who will understand your situation and give you the support that you need.

Planning the conversation

It may be hard to tell someone that you have hepatitis C. Here are a few ideas of how you can talk about it. As you will be sharing information that is important to you, try to think about where, when and how you would like to tell someone.

- Choose a time that feels right.
- Do you want to tell them over the phone, by e-mail or in person?
- If you want to tell them in person, do you want to do it in a public or private place?
- Do you want the person to keep it a secret? If so, be sure to let them know.

Some people may want to learn more about hepatitis C after the discussion. CATIE has more information about hepatitis C at www.catie.ca. You can also order free Hep C brochures from CATIE on the website or by calling 1-800-263-1638.

Figuring out what to say

If you are not sure what to say, you could try starting off with something like:

- "I have something I'd like to tell you…"
- "I feel that our relationship is strong, so I feel I can tell you that…"
- "Remember how I went to the doctor's office/clinic a few weeks ago?"

It may also be helpful to tell the person that it's OK if he or she does not know what to say.

People may react differently when you tell them the news. Some people may react with shock, fear or judgment, especially if they do not know much about hepatitis C. When people react this way it may help to give them information about Hep C. Give them time to take it in. If it feels OK for you, try to help them understand by sharing the information you've learned about Hep C with them.

Sometimes people discriminate against people with hepatitis C

Some people may not understand much about Hep C and may discriminate because they are afraid. Some people with hepatitis C have to deal with a lot of discrimination (being treated differently in a way that is negative), especially if they use drugs. The important thing to know is that you have rights just like everyone else and you should be treated with respect.

Having Hep C often changes people's lives. You may lose some friends, but you may also gain new ones.

WHEN DO I HAVE TO SHARE THAT I HAVE HEP C?

For most situations, people with Hep C do not need to tell others about their Hep C status.

At work and at home: Employees do not have to disclose to employers or unions that they have hepatitis C. Employers cannot ask about a hepatitis C infection during the application or interview process. There is no legal duty for a person with Hep C to disclose their infection to people they live with as long as there is no risk of Hep C passing.

Getting health care: People can choose whether or not to tell healthcare providers about their Hep C infection. People with Hep C do not have a legal duty to tell them. On the other hand, healthcare providers can provide better care if they know about the Hep C infection.

Hepatitis C is a reportable disease. This means that when a person is diagnosed with Hep C, his or her name (and likely other information) is given to local, provincial or territorial Public Health. There are rules in place to protect the privacy of personal information stored by Public Health.

Insurance: An insurance policy is a contract. In an insurance application, personal health information is sometimes used to determine eligibility and cost. If questions are not answered truthfully—for example, if a person does not report that he or she has the hepatitis C virus—and the insurance company finds out, the insurance policy will not be valid.

Sharing equipment to inject drugs: The criminal law in Canada is not clear about whether a person has a duty to disclose his or her Hep C infection when sharing drugs and drug equipment. As far as we know, there has not been a case where a person with Hep C has been criminally charged for exposing someone to the virus by sharing drugs or drug equipment.

During sex: It is unclear whether people who have Hep C have a legal duty to disclose to their sex partners before sex. Under Canadian criminal law, a person with a sexually transmitted infection has a legal duty to tell his or her partner about that infection before they have sex if the sex will involve a significant risk of serious bodily harm. It is not clear whether Hep C infection falls under this law. Until the courts figure this out, disclosure beforehand may be the safest way to avoid prosecution.

This information is not legal advice. If you want legal advice about your particular situation, you should speak to a lawyer.

illustration: Tammy-Lynn A., Toronto Community Hep C Program

Ever since I found out that I had Hep C I kind of thought

"Wow, that was close."

I was engaging in risky behaviour for many years, even before I became an addict. My friends and family always said that I would

"catch something or end up dead"

So then one could say finding out I was Hep C positive was a wake-up call and now being in a group is a life-saver.

Tammy-Lynn A.

(Continued from page 1)

For more information about the programs that cover the cost of treatment, check out www.catie.ca or call CATIE at 1-800-263-1638.

Do you want to have children soon?

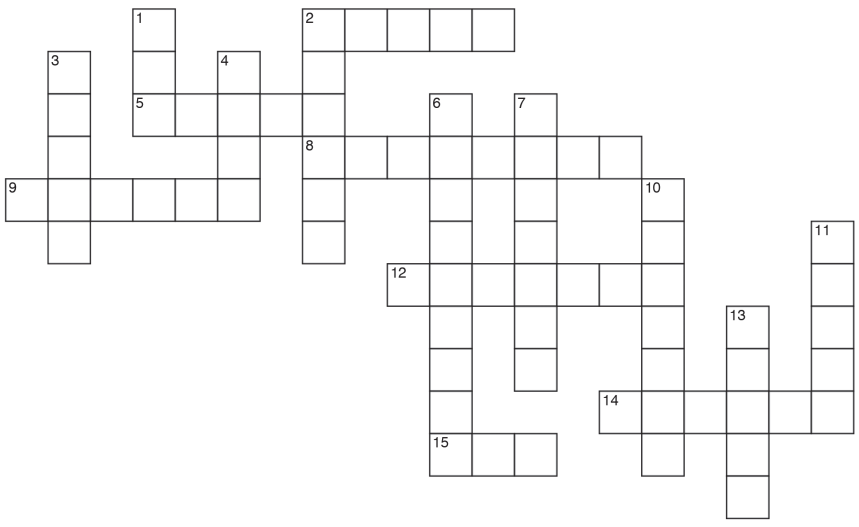
It is possible to keep your partner safe and have a healthy pregnancy and baby if you have Hep C. However, if you are taking Hep C treatment you will need to wait six months after finishing treatment to try to have a baby because treatment can harm your unborn baby. This is true regardless of whether it is you or your partner who will become pregnant. So, even if your partner will carry the pregnancy and you are the one taking Hep C treatment, you need to wait six months after treatment before trying to conceive. The likelihood of passing on Hep C to your child is very low.

What if you don't know the answers to all of these questions?

It may take some time to figure out the answers to all of these questions. You may want to talk to your doctor, nurse or another health worker to help you figure out what you want to do or how to get connected to the support you need.

You can also call CATIE with your questions at 1-800-263-1638.

CROSSWORD



ACROSS

2. Body fluid Hep C lives in
5. First stage of Hep C virus infection
8. First Hep C test
9. Sharing this while injecting drugs can pass Hep C from one person to another
12. Second stage of Hep C virus infection
14. A good person to talk to if you have Hep C
15. Number of genotypes, or strains, of hepatitis C

DOWN

1. Second Hep C test
2. What cannot kill Hep C in a syringe?
3. Drink that is good for the liver
4. Goal of Hep C treatment
6. Severe liver scarring
7. What the liver destroys
10. Lots of this can hurt the liver
11. Main body part damaged by hepatitis C
13. Canada's source for information about HIV and Hep C

Answers — Across: 2. Blood, 5. Acute, 8. Antibody, 9. Needle, 12. Chronic, 14. Doctor, 15. Six; **Down:** 1. RNA, 2. Bleach, 3. Water, 4. Cure, 6. Cirrhosis, 7. Poisons, 10. Alcohol, 11. Liver, 13. CATIE

illustration: Maureen C., Toronto Community Hep C Program

No matter what the stigma is of having Hep C
Being gay, being native or being put down by others,
I am branching out like a tree
I am taking a lot of courses like swimming, computer, yoga, and meditation
I am looking forward to treatment now that I am in the Hep C program
I am enjoying my life now
Maureen C.

WANT HEPATITIS C OR HIV INFORMATION?

We have many resources we can send you for free across Canada.

We also have Hep C and HIV educators standing by to answer your questions:

Call **1-800-263-1638 (toll-free, anywhere in Canada)** or 416-203-7122 (for collect calls from prisons).

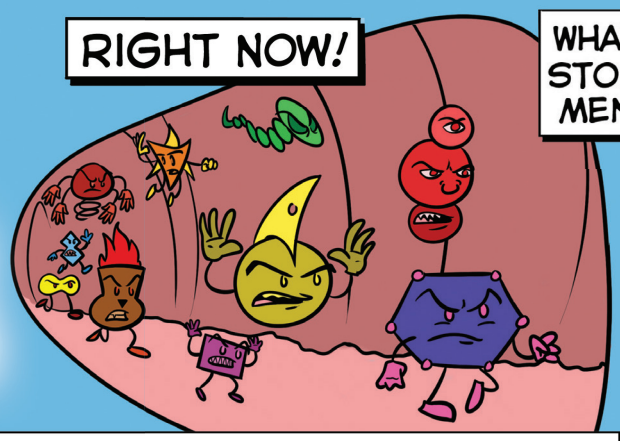
Available Monday to Thursday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Eastern Time).

CATIE
Canada's source for HIV and hepatitis C information

www.catie.ca | @CATIEinfo

BLOOD 2 BLOOD

THE AMAZING LIVER



INFECTIONS, TOXINS, AND POISONS ENTER OUR BODIES THROUGH WHAT WE EAT, DRINK, BREATHE IN, AND ABSORB THROUGH OUR SKIN.

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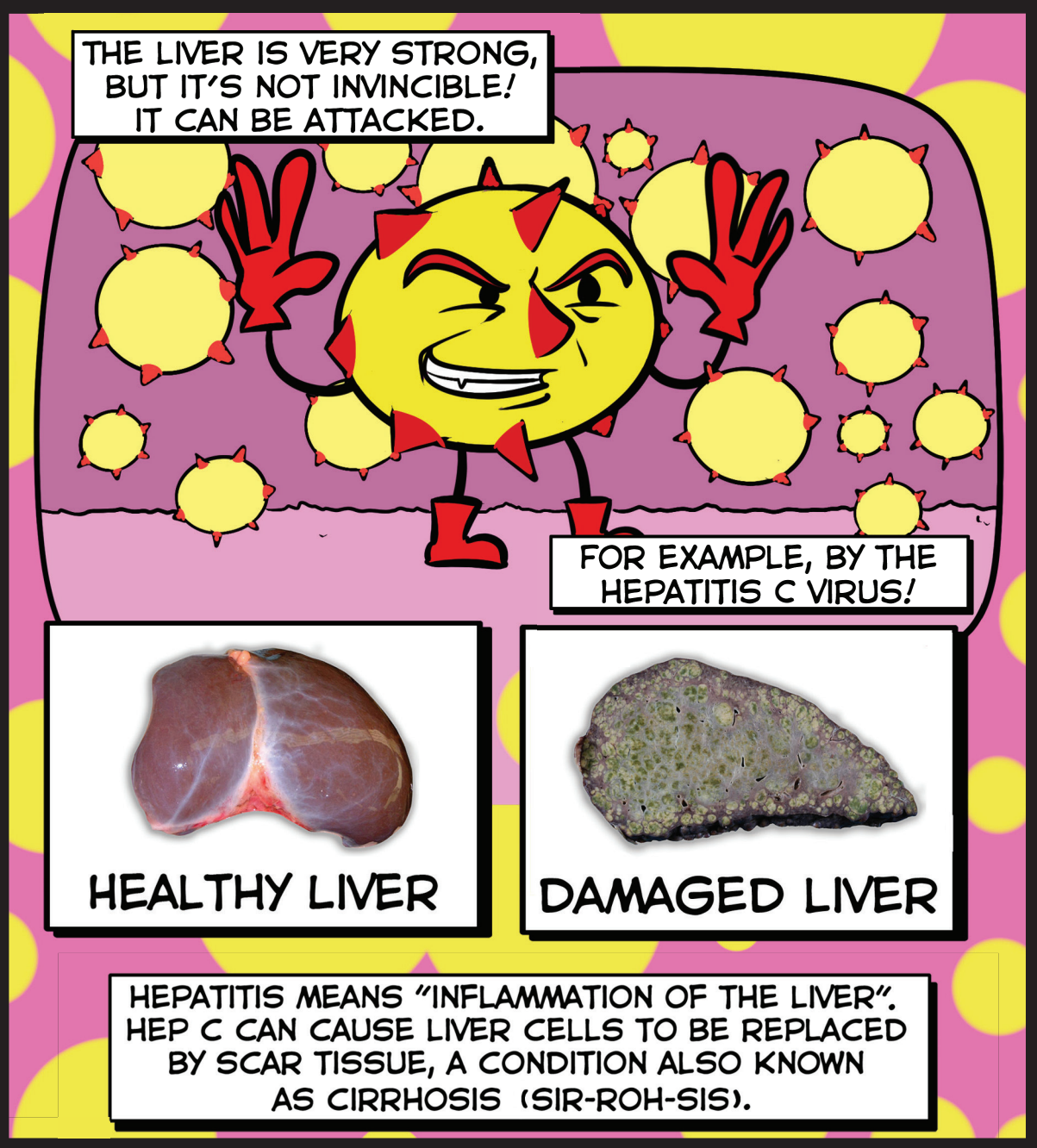

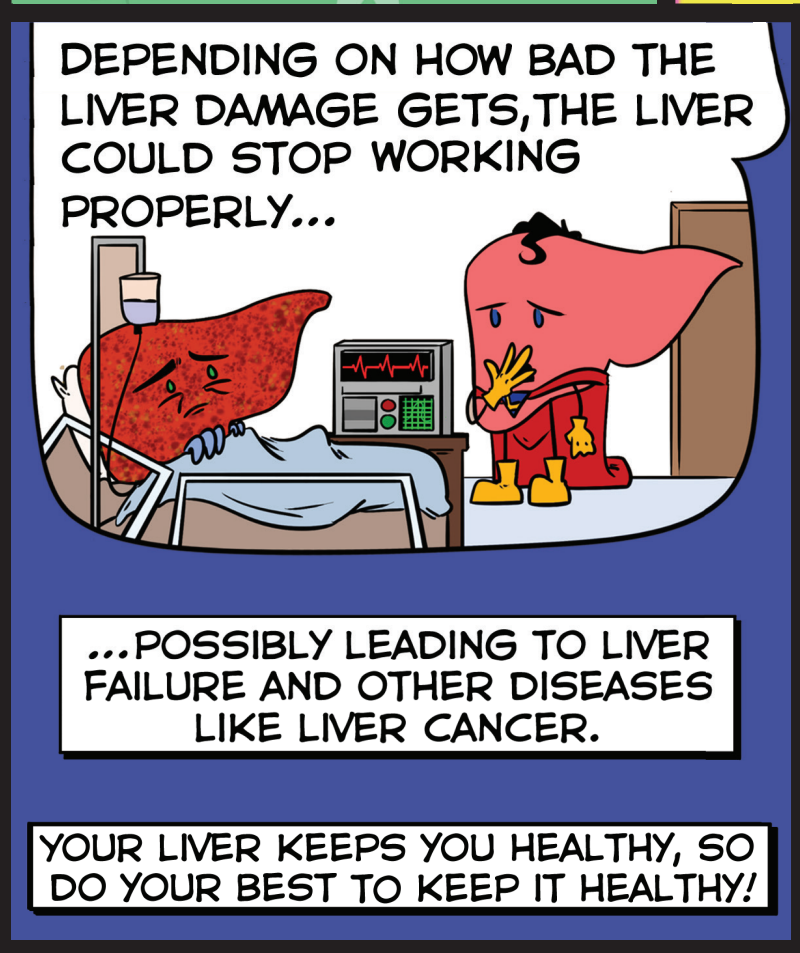

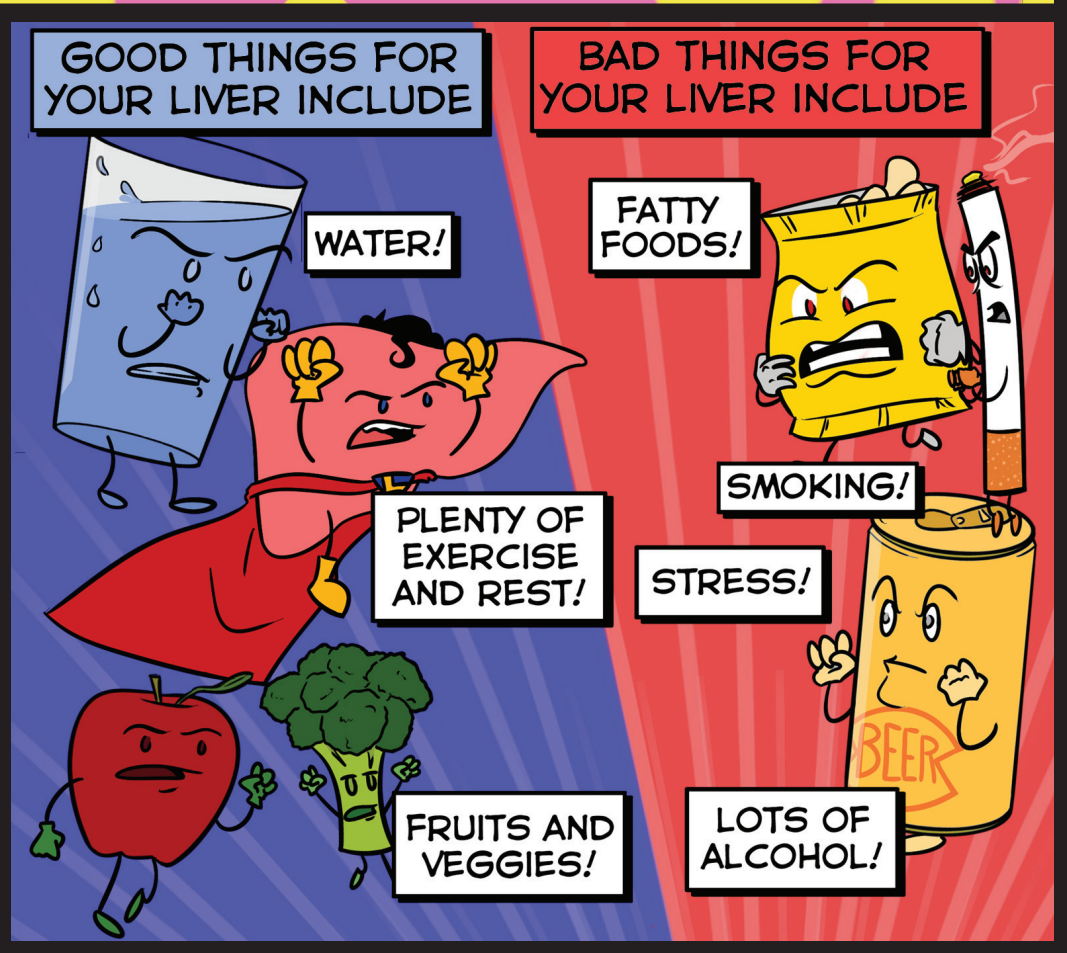

THE AMAZING LIVER IS PART OF THE BLOOD2BLOOD PROJECT CREATED BY AIDS THUNDER BAY.
DOWNLOAD THE AMAZING LIVER AND OTHER HEPATITIS C RESOURCES AT WWW.BLOOD2BLOOD.ORG