

# HEPATITIS C

in the **Workplace**



# HEPATITIS C

## Basics

The word “hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis is caused by viruses, which 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 hepatitis virus at the same time. Each virus is completely different from the other viruses, all are prevented and transmitted differently, and each causes different symptoms.

### Hepatitis A

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

### Hepatitis B

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 through 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 C

Hepatitis C is transmitted only through blood-to-blood contact. Eighty percent of those infected with the hepatitis C virus will develop chronic (lifelong) symptoms, and about 20% of the people who have chronic symptoms will eventually develop liver cirrhosis (scarring of the liver). It is important to know that hepatitis C does not always make people sick (one out of five people will actually get rid of the virus without any treatment), and for those who do experience illness, it can take many years for symptoms to develop. There is no vaccine for hepatitis C.

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

# HEPATITIS C

# Transmission

The hepatitis C virus (Hep C) 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:

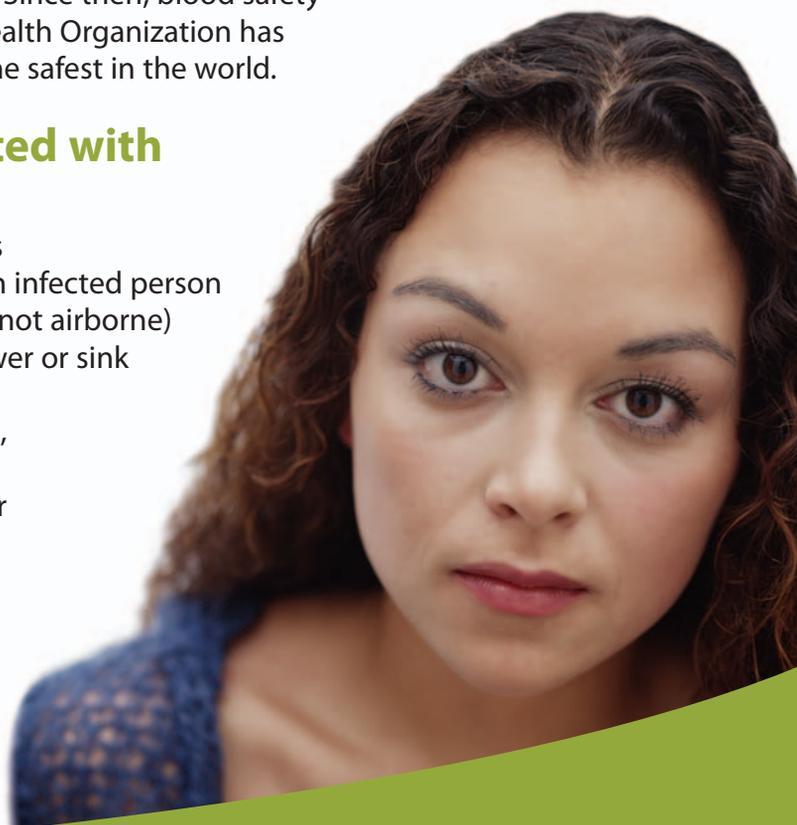
- A** Sharing equipment to inject or ingest drugs (needles, water, cookers, filters, pipes, straws, etc.);
- B** Sharing body piercing equipment, tattoo machines and ink, or acupuncture needles;
- C** Sharing a razor, toothbrush, or nail clippers;
- D** Accidental occupational exposure (being poked by 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 – unprotected sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal sex without a condom) is considered a low-risk activity.

Some Canadians were infected with Hep C through blood transfusions before screening was implemented in 1990. 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.

## No one has ever been infected with Hep C through:

- sharing eating utensils, dishes or glasses
- consuming food or drink prepared by an infected person
- being coughed or sneezed on (Hep C is not airborne)
- using the same bathroom or toilet, shower or sink
- sharing water fountains or coffee pots
- sharing office supplies, computers, tools, telephones, desks, or uniforms
- 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 reason to disclose one's Hep C status at work.**

It is possible that an employee with Hep C may never become ill during the period of employment. Many people with Hep C have been living with the virus for many years, have normal-functioning livers, and are actively engaged in full-time work. For some, it can take over 20 years before symptoms develop.

Employers consider it important for 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. If these standards are being met, it doesn't matter whether an employee has Hep C or not.

## 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 include: extreme fatigue, muscle, joint or abdominal discomfort, loss of appetite and weight loss, sleep disturbance, and depression. Due to these symptoms, job performance may be hindered if the employee is not able to carry out the 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 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 some people have to take medical leave from work.
- An employee living with Hep C is under no legal obligation to tell people at work about his or her infection. If work is or will likely be affected by illness, the employee may choose to inform his or her supervisors that there is a health condition or illness and that he or she may require accommodation.
- Even though an employee is not required to reveal Hep C status to anyone in the workplace, physicians may need to reveal the specific conditions to disability insurance companies. An employee who needs to take medical leave will need to notify supervisors, and provide a letter from a physician in order to apply for disability insurance.

- When an employee submits an insurance claim, sometimes the paperwork passes 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 to prevent anyone in the workplace from reviewing the details.
- If an employee feels he or she cannot handle full-time work and is considering switching to part-time hours, it may be a good idea to consult with the insurance company beforehand. Employees seeking disability benefits may find that these benefits from a part-time income are much less than they would have been if they had applied for disability while on a full-time income.
- 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 person to discuss medical information with any other person 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.
- If an employee chooses to disclose his or her Hep C 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 medical information) to third parties (other employees, other employers, etc.) without the employee's consent.



# HEPATITIS C and Human Rights

Canada and each province and territory have anti-discrimination laws that protect people living with disabilities. 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.”*

It also states:

*“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 considered disabilities under Canadian anti-discrimination law, and every employer has a duty to accommodate an employee with a disability. To accommodate an employee means to remove barriers (physical, policy or attitudinal) so that a person is able to do the essential duties of his or her job, despite the fact that he or she has a disabling medical condition. For example, a simple accommodation might be changing an employee’s work schedule to permit him or her to go for treatment and medical appointments.

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.

One area where anti-discrimination law does not fully protect an employee with a disability is employment-related insurance. Anti-discrimination laws often make exceptions that 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.

# Precautions

## Food Preparation

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 consider these points:

- Transmission of Hep C does not occur through oral ingestion or food-borne contamination. Always discard food that has had blood spilled on it, regardless of the employee, as it has been contaminated (it is illegal to sell contaminated food).
- To prevent the potential transmission of other bacteria or viruses (like Hep A), all employees should be performing proper hand-washing and safe food-handling techniques. For more information, please talk to your local health unit about food preparation.



## First Aid

When administering first aid, remember that Hep C is transmitted only 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. If required, perform mouth-to-mouth resuscitation with a mouth guard to avoid coming into contact with blood.
- Report any workplace accidents to a supervisor as soon as possible.

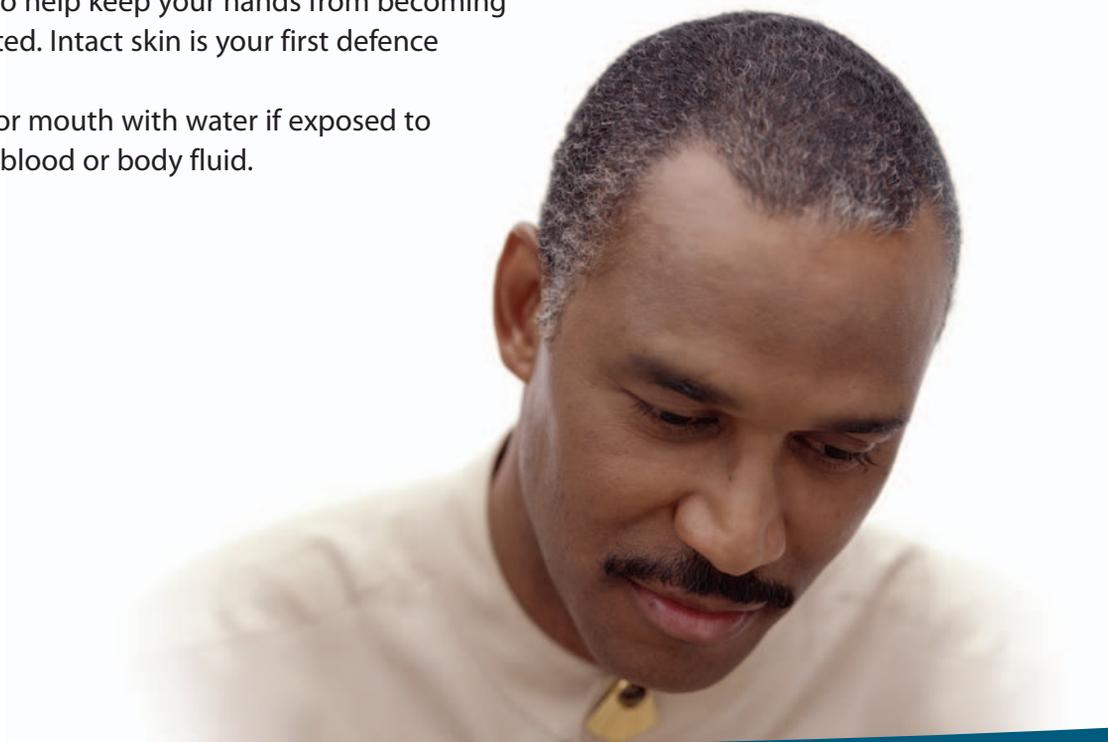


# Universal Precautions

Like many viruses, Hep C is a blood-borne virus, which means that it is transmitted through blood. You can't tell by looking at someone whether or not he or she is infected, and people who are infected with viruses like Hep C may not even know it. That's why it is important to use the same precautions when dealing with blood or other body fluids – assume that everyone is infected. That is the premise of universal precautions.

### Here is a list of universal precautions that can be put into practice in the workplace:

- 1 Bandage all cuts right away to avoid contact with other people.
- 2 Blood and other body fluid should be cleaned using a solution of 1 part bleach, 9 parts water.
- 3 Do not use bare hands to clean up items soiled with blood or other body fluids; wear gloves.
- 4 Put sharp items into a solid, sealable container that won't puncture garbage bags to prevent those handling garbage from pricking themselves.
- 5 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 latex gloves.
- 6 Use hand lotion to help keep your hands from becoming chapped or irritated. Intact skin is your first defence against infection!
- 7 Flush eyes, nose or mouth with water if exposed to another person's blood or body fluid.



# Workplace Policy

A good way to deal with Hep C in the workplace is to develop workplace policies and procedures that can lead to a protected and educated workforce.

## Topics that the policy should include, but are not limited to, are:

- 1 the employee's right to work as long as his/her health allows it
- 2 the employee's right to workplace accommodations and to confidentiality
- 3 the employee's eligibility for benefits
- 4 references to relevant legislation
- 5 responsibilities of the employer, the employee, and co-workers
- 6 the company's responsibility for educating employees about Hep C, including the risks of transmission
- 7 the steps the company will take to provide a supportive environment for people with Hep C or other chronic or life-threatening illnesses.

## A Sample Policy

Here is an example of a policy statement that can be adopted in a variety of workplaces.

*(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 about the condition;
- ensure continued employment as long as the employee is able to perform the essential duties of his/her job or has been reasonably accommodated to the point of undue hardship;
- ensure continued coverage under the terms and conditions of the current benefit 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; and
- post information indicating whom employees should contact within the workplace if they feel harassed or discriminated against due to their condition.

### Informing the employer

- A** An employee is under no obligation to disclose that he or she is living with hepatitis C.
- B** Anyone who has any illness or disability should inform his or her supervisor when he or she is no longer able to perform essential duties of his or her job.
- C** Anyone wishing to claim benefits for medical expenses (such as prescriptions) or disability through the benefits package will be required to provide complete medical information to the insurance company supplying the benefits.
- D** 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 coworkers.
- E** A supervisor may need information about the employee's capacity to work in order to accommodate an employee's disability.

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

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