

What is Hepatitis C?

- First identified in 1989. Previously diagnosed as non A, non B hepatitis or post transfusion hepatitis.
- It affects millions of people around the world.
- 90% of new infections in Australia result from the sharing or reuse of injecting equipment contaminated with infected blood.
- More than 73% of people with newly acquired hepatitis C infection report a history of injecting drug use.
- In 2004, hepatitis C prevalence was 28% among people aged less than 20 years who inject drugs and was 43% among those aged 20 – 24 years.
- 10% of infections result from other behaviors which involve blood to blood contact such as tattooing and body piercing with contaminated equipment, needle stick injuries and vertical transmission from mother to baby (low risk).
- Testing for hepatitis C antibodies was introduced in 1990. Prior to this up to 10% of new infections resulted from blood transfusions and receipt of blood products. All blood products are now tested for hepatitis C.
- Approximately 25% of people living with hepatitis C will clear the virus within 2 – 6 months of becoming infected – they will however continue to carry antibodies to the virus.
- 75% of those infected will have ongoing or chronic hepatitis C.
- After 20 years up to 10% of people living with chronic hepatitis C will develop cirrhosis (extensive scarring to the liver). This may increase to 20% of people after 40 years.
- There are approximately 10 different strains of hepatitis C known as genotypes (see fact sheet on genotypes for more information) a person can be re-infected with the same or one or more genotypes
- There is currently no vaccine to protect against hepatitis C – it is unlikely that one will be developed in the near future.
- Sometimes hepatitis C is referred to as HCV or is abbreviated to ‘hep C’ in conversation.

**Taken from the National Hepatitis C Resource Manual – Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing, Australian Institute for Primary Care 2001 –**

<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/publishing.nsf/Content/health-pubhlth-strateg-hivhepc-hrpc-manual.htm>