

APPENDIX 3

Patient information – Natural history and transmission of HCV

What is HCV?	Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is a blood-borne virus that can cause hepatitis. Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver.
What does the liver do?	The liver is the second largest organ and plays an important role in many vital functions of the body. Some of the liver's many functions include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acting as a filter to remove alcohol and other toxic substances from the body • processing and clearing drugs and medications • manufacturing the many chemical substances needed by the body
How does HCV affect people?	<p>When someone gets the HCV infection, his or her body produces tiny proteins called antibodies in an attempt to eliminate the virus. During the first 2–8 weeks, the person may feel slightly ill or off-colour. Typical hepatitis symptoms (fatigue, yellowed skin or eyes) are uncommon with initial HCV infection.</p> <p>In approximately 75% of initial hepatitis C infections, antibodies do not eliminate the hepatitis C virus. When the virus is not eliminated, HCV infection is ongoing. This is called 'chronic hepatitis C'. Most people eventually develop some signs of hepatitis C illness—usually after ten years or so. The symptoms are mild for many people. However, for a minority of people, hepatitis C may be quite debilitating.</p> <p>The exact nature and timing of short-term and long-term consequences of HCV infection are not clear. The most commonly reported signs of hepatitis C illness are fatigue or pain in the upper right side of the abdomen. Only one person in five develops severe scarring of the liver or cirrhosis. If it occurs, cirrhosis usually takes 20–40 years to develop. Less than one in ten people develop liver failure or liver cancer. These conditions usually take 20–40 years to develop. In a small proportion of people, the virus can cause problems in parts of the body other than the liver, such as the joints, skin and kidneys.</p>
How many people have HCV ?	<p>It is estimated that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • approximately 1–2 in every 100 Australians are infected with HCV • 80% of Australians infected with HCV acquired the virus through injecting drug use • 5–10% of Australians living with HCV acquired the virus through transfusion of blood and blood products between the 1970s and 1980s • 10–15% of Australians infected with HCV are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
How do people know what is happening to their liver?	A liver function test monitors the level of liver enzymes in the blood. If there is damage to liver cells, these levels may be raised. Liver function tests are often a poor indicator of illness outcome. People who want a more detailed and reliable indication of liver damage should consider a liver biopsy. This is a procedure where a small amount of liver tissue is taken using a needle.
How is HCV transmitted?	HCV is spread through infected blood entering someone else's bloodstream (e.g. by sharing and reusing contaminated syringes and other injecting equipment, non-sterile tattooing or piercing, and non-sterile medical procedures). Mother-to-child transmission occurs in less than 5% of cases. Sexual transmission of HCV is regarded as very rare, although anal penetration or the presence of blood may increase the risk of sexual transmission.
How is HCV transmission prevented?	<p>The risk of HCV transmission is reduced by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • safe injecting practices (Chapter 3 and Appendix 4) • avoiding sharing and reusing contaminated objects that pierce the skin • standard infection control precautions (Chapter 13) • practising safe sex.

Appendices 1–3 written by Katherine Fethers et al, authors of Chapter 9.