

HEPATITIS C

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is an infectious virus carried in the blood that affects the liver. HCV was first identified in 1989. It likely caused the majority of infections identified as non A/non B hepatitis prior to that date.

Hepatitis C infection is now reportable in all provinces and territories in Canada where there are more than 4,000 new cases diagnosed each year. It is estimated that 0.8 per cent of the Canadian population is infected with hepatitis C.

Health Canada predicts that because the prevalence of hepatitis C is much higher than HIV infection, the costs associated with caring for these people are expected to exceed those for HIV. Damage caused by HCV is now the leading reason for liver transplants in North America.

Symptoms of hepatitis C infection include jaundice, fatigue, poor appetite, abdominal pain and general malaise. The only way to know for sure if a person has hepatitis C is to test for the virus via a blood test. Complications from hepatitis C sometimes do not appear until 20 to 30 years after the initial infection.

HCV is not transmitted by casual contact such as hugging or kissing an infected person. HCV is spread through contact with the blood of an infected person through such means as:

- Blood transfusion (in Canada before 1990);
- Tattooing, body piercing or acupuncture in which the operator uses equipment or ink that has been contaminated with blood;
- Being born to a mother who has hepatitis C;
- Injury from a contaminated needle or other item;
- Sharing personal articles such as a razor or toothbrush, with an infected person; and
- Sharing needles and other drug-related equipment.

HCV is not considered a sexually transmitted disease. The transmission of HCV from spouse to spouse is rare. Having sexual intercourse with multiple partners and having existing HIV or herpes simplex II infection have been associated with an increased risk for hepatitis C infection.

While there is no vaccination to prevent hepatitis C, it is a treatable disease. Early treatment may enhance the patient's response, and treatment may put the infection into remission in some people.

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The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) has been working for several years to increase nurses' awareness of HCV and ability to prevent the spread of HCV, while increasing their competencies in caring for people who have contracted HCV.

In 2002, CNA published *Hepatitis C: A Nursing Guide*. This publication has reached more than 10,000 nurses to date. CNA also carried out the following projects:

- From January to March 2002, 80 nurses were mentored in their area of work by nurse-experts;
- In March 2002, discussions were held with nurse educators and experts regarding nursing education, leading to scholarships offered through the Canadian Nurses Foundation (CNF);
- In June 2002, a national workshop was held for 50 people prior to CNA's convention in June;
- In September 2002, six online presentations were made available to nurses via CNA's web site; and
- In 2003, CNA coordinated an educate-the-educator program that reached hundreds of nurses.

Visit CNA's web site at www.cna-aiic.ca to download the guide, educate-the-educator materials and online presentations in both official languages.

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References:

Canadian Nurses Association. (2002). *Hepatitis C: A Nursing Guide*. Ottawa: Author.

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