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Hepatitis C Factsheet

There are an estimated 500,000 people in the UK with hepatitis C. (That's about ten times the number of people with HIV). Out of that number, less than 1% receive treatment.

The moving documentary *Louie, Me and Hepatitis C* raises awareness for this potentially fatal disease and follows the difficulties experienced by Hep C sufferer Gemma Peppe (above) while she juggles treatment with looking after her 12-year-old son Louie.

What is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus carried in the blood. It occurs when blood from an infected person enters the blood stream of a person who is not infected. Hep C can be passed on through sharing equipment for injecting drugs, sharing razors or toothbrushes, or from an infected mother to her baby during birth.

Hepatitis C is a blood-borne virus that affects the liver, already a major cause of liver transplants in the UK. Liver damage typically occurs slowly over 20-30 years and can lead to liver scarring (fibrosis), cirrhosis and ultimately to liver cancer or liver failure and death.

Hepatitis C was discovered in the 1980s when it was discovered that there was a new virus (not hepatitis A or B) causing liver damage, so it is a relatively newly identified disease. It was known as non-A non-B hepatitis until properly identified in 1989. A screening process was developed in 1991 to detect Hep C in blood samples, and there are still many aspects of the virus that are little or poorly understood. And deaths from liver disease are the fifth biggest cause of mortality in the UK.

What are the symptoms of Hepatitis C?

The main symptoms of Hepatitis C are fatigue, pain in the liver area, digestive problems, concentration difficulties ('brain fog') and flu-like symptoms such as headaches, shivering and aching joints. Some people experience only a few of these. Many experience none at all or simply put them down to the stress of living. The presence or absence of symptoms is no indication of how much damage the virus is causing to the liver, and this has led to Hepatitis C being termed 'The Silent Killer'.

How many people are actually infected with Hep C?

While there has been no proper survey of the prevalence (level of infection) of Hepatitis C in the UK, the Department of Health has estimated that 0.4% of the UK's 60 million population have chronic infection, equivalent to 240,000 people. NICE says the figure is up to 600,000. The Hepatitis C Trust believes it is around 500,000 or 0.8%, higher than the Department of Health's estimate but lower than the French rate of 1%. By comparison the rate in the US is 1.8% and in Italy 3%.

In the UK only 50,000 have been diagnosed with chronic Hepatitis C, according to the Health Protection Agency, which means that up to 9 out of 10 of those infected have no idea they have the virus. These individuals are therefore at risk of both developing serious liver disease themselves and of unwittingly infecting others. This compares with France where, thanks to a vigorous government strategy, 300,000 or half the 600,000 infected have so far been diagnosed. Hepatitis C is already a major cause of liver transplant in the UK and, unless there is an equally vigorous government response here, the demand for livers for transplantation will vastly outstrip availability.

How can one get Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is transmitted by blood-to-blood contact. The major ways of coming into contact with infected blood are:

- Sharing equipment for injecting drugs
- Sharing straws, noses, etc. for snorting cocaine (cocaine is particularly corrosive)
- Medical or dental treatments in high prevalence countries, and also where sterilisation isn't as prevalent.
- Sharing razors, toothbrushes or other household articles that come into contact with broken skin (in both people)
- Tattooing or piercing, if done with unsterile equipment (for example in prison)
- From mother to baby at birth
- From blood transfusions (this is before a test became available in 1991 to screen donated blood)
- From using blood clotting factors for haemophiliacs (this is before heat treatment was introduced in 1985 in the UK, and in 1987 in Scotland)

Hepatitis C is not transmitted through normal social contact such as touching, hugging or kissing. Whether it can be transmitted sexually is uncertain. It appears to be very rare, if it happens at all, in monogamous heterosexual relationships where blood is not present. It is believed to be more likely in sex with multiple partners, anal sex or where other sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV, are present. For more information on transmission, please see the 'Are you at risk' section on our website, www.hepctrust.org.uk.

How is the Hepatitis C virus treated?

Hep C is treated with the combination of two drugs, interferon alpha and ribavirin, and 40% of patients respond to therapy. Until recently, only individuals with moderate to severe liver damage were eligible to receive treatment. However, on the 23rd of August the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) issued

guidance recommending the use of the combination therapy for the treatment of people with mild chronic hepatitis. Since Hep C principally attacks the liver, a transplant is needed if damage is severe.



Despite her struggles, Gemma remains determined to live a full life and be a good mother. She even embarks on an investigation into the discrimination and prejudice against those who suffer from the disease.

Hepatitis C Trust

The Hepatitis C Trust is the national UK charity for hepatitis C. It is an entirely patient-led and patient-run organisation. It raises public awareness that this is a virus that can be contracted in many ways ensuring that people infected with it are not discriminated against and creating an active community of patients willing to stand up and be heard.

Address: 27 Crosby Row, London, SE1 3YD
Helpline: 0845 223 4424 (Mon-Fri 10.30am-4.30pm)
Email: helpline@hepctrust.org.uk
Website: www.hepctrust.org.uk

Community Channel, 2ndFloor, Riverwalk House,157-161 Millbank, London, SW1P 4RR
www.communitychannel.org info@communitychannel.org