

Hepatitis C in Ontario

More than 110,000 Ontarians are living with hepatitis C, a leading cause of death and illness from an infectious disease.

Prevention

Hepatitis C is an infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. It is passed from person to person through blood-to-blood contact. If left untreated, chronic hepatitis C infection can cause serious liver injury over time, which may lead to liver failure and liver cancer. Ontario currently funds a number of prevention initiatives across the province, including an established harm reduction distribution program for new drug use equipment.

Continued investment in harm reduction programs is crucial to preventing new hepatitis C cases among people who use drugs. This includes widespread access to new drug use equipment, including in smaller communities and in prisons.

Testing and diagnosis

It is estimated that one in three Ontarians living with hepatitis C are unaware of their infection. The only way to know if a person has hepatitis C is through testing. Standard testing in Ontario requires two separate blood tests that are sent from a clinic to a central testing laboratory. Testing can take several weeks and requires at least two appointments.

Newer testing approaches can streamline diagnosis. Funding point-of-care and dried blood spot testing can expand access to simplified testing in community or non-clinical settings, including for people with difficult vein access or who live in rural areas. Reflex testing, where the second diagnostic test is done automatically, can

dramatically shorten the time for diagnosis, enabling people to be linked to treatment more quickly and reducing the likelihood that they will fall out of care.

One-time, universal testing as part of routine healthcare can find people who are undiagnosed. Universal testing can reduce the stigma associated with hepatitis C and is cost-effective compared with the burden of the long-term health impacts of hepatitis C infection. Publicizing universal testing can help raise awareness of hepatitis C among the public and their providers.

Treatment

Modern treatments for hepatitis C are highly effective and cure over 95% of people with hepatitis C. These treatments are effective for everyone living with hepatitis C, including people who use drugs. Treatment is covered for most people in Ontario through public insurance plans.

Primary care providers are key to expanding access to hepatitis C treatment. With adequate training and supports, physicians and nurse practitioners can prescribe treatment. Other providers, like nurses, can oversee most aspects of care during treatment.

Hepatitis C care can be integrated into existing services and delivered by familiar, trusted providers. This includes providers working in primary care settings and pop-up clinics or in partnerships with other health and social services accessed by people most affected by hepatitis C.