INSTRUCTIONS FOR PERSONS WHO ARE CARRIERS OF HEPATITIS C-VIRUS

Hepatitis C -virus (HCV) causes infection of the liver. The virus is transmitted mainly through blood. In Finland most patients get hepatitis-C infection as a result of using intravenous drugs. There are several subtypes of the virus so one can get the infection many times. Sexual transmission is rare. The risk of a baby contracting hepatitis C infection from the mother during pregnancy or delivery is small (around 5%) and it is not necessary to avoid breastfeeding. Hepatitis C is not transmitted in ordinary everyday contacts and a carrier of hepatitis C can continue working or attending school without restrictions. The virus cannot be transmitted through intact skin. During pregnancy the patient should attend a hospital maternity clinic.

Usually hepatitis C does not cause any symptoms. Most of the patients (80%) remain permanent carriers of the hepatitis C virus. About half of the carriers develop chronic liver disease within ten years. Some of them will develop liver cirrhosis which may lead to development of liver cancer. Alcohol consumption considerably increases the risk of developing serious liver damage.

There is no vaccination against hepatitis C and the transmission cannot be prevented by antibodies (immunoglobulin). All hepatitis C patients should be tested for hepatitis B- and HIV- antibodies.

Instructions on how to avoid spreading hepatitis C:

Do not donate blood, breastmilk or sperm. Do not carry an organ donation card. Notify your doctor, dentist or nurse that you are a hepatitis C carrier. The risk of health care workers contracting the infection is very small if adequate precautions are followed.

You do not usually need to use a condom in intercourse with your regular partner if you do not have other diseases transmitted by blood and sexual contact (for example hepatitis B or HIV-infection).

Take care that your skin stays intact. Wash your hands after touching secretions. Clean even small wounds and cover them with a plaster or a bandage. Destroy with care bloodstained bandages (especially sanitary towels) and place them separately in a plastic bag before putting them into a dustbin. If somebody touches material soiled with your blood, he should use gloves. You can wash your dishes normally.

Bloodstained laundry should first be rinsed with cold water in the prewash programme of the washing machine, preferably with enzyme detergent. After that it can be washed in the temperature recommended for the material. If it is not possible to use a washing machine, the laundry can be soaked in a disinfecting substance which contains chloride (for example Klorin®) following the manufacturers’ instructions for use.
Stains of blood or secretions containing blood should be wiped from surfaces with a disposable cloth using a disinfecting substance which contains chloride (for example Super-Kloriitti®) following the manufacturers’ instructions for use. Lastly wash your hands.

Do not borrow or lend personal hygienic possessions, such as comb, toothbrush or shaver and keep your own possessions separately from those of others. Avoid other factors that damage your liver (especially alcohol and medicines causing liver damage).

Hepatitis C is easily transmitted using intravenous drugs. If you continue to use drugs you may get new subtypes of hepatitis C -virus and develop a bigger risk of liver damage. Sterilising needles and syringes yourself does not guarantee that there is no risk of getting infection. Hepatitis C can also be transmitted through the cup in which the drug is drawn into the syringe.

Medication is only used for hepatitis C if there is clear evidence that it is causing liver infection. There are side effects from the treatment and for it to succeed, instructions must be carefully followed. To assess the need for medication, various blood tests are taken, the most important one testing for high liver enzymes (ALAT) and HCV-PCR. A liver biopsy may also be performed to help assert the need for treatment. Your doctor estimates what type of treatment is the most suitable for you. A condition for starting treatment is that there are no contraindications such as drug-, alcohol- or medicine addiction or abuse. If treatment is free, medication is free for the patients.