

## Love your liver

### *The Health Column*

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Globally, the impact of hepatitis B and hepatitis C is staggering. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that about 400 million people have chronic viral hepatitis worldwide.

In Australia, approximately 218,000 people are living with chronic hepatitis B and more than 226,000 Australians are living with chronic hepatitis C.

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver – from any cause. Hepatitis C is transmitted via blood to blood contact and unlike other common hepatitis viruses A and B, there is no vaccine available to protect against hepatitis C. Prevention strategies, managing symptoms and reducing the risk of liver damage are critical.

The liver is our largest internal organ – and in some ways, the most complex.

There are many very good reasons why we should look after our liver but generally we do not treat it well. Instead, we constantly put it under stress, with alcohol being one of the worst offenders. Other medicines (including complementary and alternative medicines) and substances also have the potential to cause liver problems.

Viral hepatitis is recognised each year with World Hepatitis Day on 28 July. On this day individuals, community groups, clinicians and other supporters run events to raise awareness.

In 2008, the first World Hepatitis Day was launched by the World Hepatitis Alliance, in response to concerns that chronic viral hepatitis did not have the level of awareness, nor the political priority, seen with other communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

The aim of World Hepatitis Day is to improve levels of liver health literacy, viral hepatitis knowledge within the general community, to break down barriers such as stigma, and create more positive attitudes towards those living with viral hepatitis.

Every year World Hepatitis Day gets bigger and bigger, with more countries and organisations participating. Since its launch in 2008, thousands of events have taken place, from rock concerts and press briefings to ministerial meetings and fundraising events.



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Through these coordinated events, the hepatitis sector and the community are able to highlight the significance of viral hepatitis to a large audience around Australia and also promote the Love your Liver campaign.

Love your Liver was launched in 2011 by Hepatitis Australia. It is a 5 year campaign with the long term aim of normalising viral hepatitis and portraying it as a health condition without moralising.

The Love your Liver campaign provides a safe and non-threatening platform to start conversations with the general public about viral hepatitis. Everyone has a liver, and therefore potentially has some interest in liver health.

To look after the liver, a healthy diet is a high priority. You should build regular light to moderate exercise into your routine. Alcohol intake should be also limited and if you smoke, talk to your pharmacist for assistance to stop.

Special subsidised antiviral therapy is available under certain criteria for people with confirmed hepatitis C infection. However these medicines are potent, with possible interactions and side effects. Talk to your pharmacist about antiviral therapy.

Muscle and joint pain, and pain in the area of the liver, is frequently a symptom of hepatitis C, and the appropriate use of pain relievers needs to be considered. Paracetamol and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory pain relievers can be used (not exceeding the recommended doses, and not in advanced liver disease). Heat packs and massage are also effective non-pharmacological options. Skin moisturisers, lubricating eye drops and saliva substitutes are also helpful to relieve the dryness caused by hepatitis C, and you can find all of these products in pharmacies.

As we approach World Hepatitis Day on 28 July, consider what changes you can make to improve the health of your liver. Your local pharmacy is your health destination and you can get more advice about hepatitis B and C from pharmacies delivering the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. Your Self Care pharmacy provides Fact Cards for *Alcohol*, *Staying a Non Smoker* and *Weight and Health*. Additionally, many pharmacies also offer services to assist people with quitting smoking and losing weight.

To locate your nearest Self Care pharmacy, go to [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au): 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.