

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 500 million people to be infected with hepatitis B or C, Worldwide. These viruses kill 1.5 million people a year; 1 in every 3 people has been exposed to either or both viruses and most infected people do not know about it due to dormant symptoms. In Australia, approximately 225,000 people are living with chronic hepatitis B and more than 226,000 Australians are living with chronic hepatitis C.

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

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 other substances also have the potential to cause liver problems.

Viral hepatitis is recognised on July 28 each year with **World Hepatitis Day**. On this day individuals, community groups, clinicians and other supporters run events to raise awareness. This year sees the first ever World Health Organization's Global Strategy for Viral Hepatitis, which sets a goal of eliminating viral hepatitis as a public health threat by 2030.

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, knowledge of viral hepatitis 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. Through these coordinated



events, the hepatitis sector and the community are able to highlight the significance of viral hepatitis to a large audience around the world. In Australia, they also use this opportunity to promote the Love your Liver campaign.

Love your Liver was launched in 2011 by Hepatitis Australia. It is a 5-year health promotion 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 also build regular light to moderate exercise into your routine. Alcohol intake should be limited and if you smoke, talk to your pharmacist for assistance with quitting.

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 **Thursday, 28 July**, consider what changes you can make to improve the health of your liver. Your local pharmacy is your health destination. You can get more information about hepatitis B and C from pharmacies around Australia delivering the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. Self Care Fact Cards available from these pharmacies include topics such as *Alcohol*, *Staying a Non Smoker* and *Weight and Health*. Additionally, many pharmacies also offer services to assist people with quitting smoking and losing weight.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location, phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.