Hepatitis C Virus (HCV)
Disease Backgrounder

FAST FACTS:
• Hepatitis C virus (HCV) has become a serious public health issue around the world and is considered a ‘viral time bomb’ by the World Health Organization due to its high prevalence, long term unpredictable disease progression, aging population, and low diagnosis and treatment rates
• Approximately 15-25% of those infected with HCV will naturally clear the virus from their body; 70-90% will develop chronic infection
• Approximately 150 million people globally are living with HCV, however many are unaware of their infection
• HCV can cause severe liver problems, including liver cancer and cirrhosis. In fact, approximately 76% of all liver cancers are a direct result of HCV infection

What is hepatitis C (HCV)?
• ‘Hepatitis’ means inflammation of the liver, and refers to a group of viral infections that affect the liver
• The most common types are hepatitis A, B, and C. While there are vaccines available to prevent hepatitis A and B, there is currently no available vaccine for HCV
• HCV is one of the most common viral liver diseases; it has six identified genotypes and more than 50 subtypes, with genotype 1 being the most common in many regions including Europe, America, Japan, China, Australia and New Zealand - and the most difficult to treat
• While it has always been regarded as a liver disease, HCV is also associated with numerous hematological, renal, dermatologic, rheumatic, autoimmune and brain disorders

What are the consequences of HCV?
• Chronic HCV can result in serious long-term health problems; an estimated 30% of individuals will develop progressive liver disease, including cirrhosis (deterioration and scarring of the liver) and hepatocellular carcinoma (liver cancer)
• Chronic HCV is the leading cause for liver transplantation
• Patients with chronic HCV infection are more at risk of developing comorbidities than non-infected patients, including cardiovascular, renal, and central nervous systems conditions

How common is HCV?
• Worldwide, approximately 150 million people are infected with HCV. To put this into context, approximately 33 million people are living with HIV
• In Western Europe, an estimated 5 million people are infected with HCV and prevalence tends to be even higher in developing countries, such as North Africa
• The economic burden of HCV is high, largely due to the
management of its long-term consequences, including cirrhosis, liver cancer and liver transplantation

**Who is at risk?**

- HCV infection is spread through blood contact
- Before widespread screening of blood supplies began in 1992, HCV was commonly spread through blood transfusions and organ transplants\(^\text{12}\)
- Today, most people become infected with HCV by sharing needles or other equipment used to inject drugs\(^\text{13}\)
- Additional populations at risk for contracting HCV include:\(^\text{12}\)
  - Haemodialysis patients
  - People with body piercings and tattoos who may have been exposed to improperly sanitized equipment
  - People sharing personal care items that may have come in contact with another person’s blood, such as razors or toothbrushes
  - Children born to mothers who are infected with HCV
  - People who have sexual contact with a person infected with HCV

**What are the symptoms of infection?**

- People infected with HCV may not experience any obvious symptoms. In fact, most people are unaware for decades that they have contracted HCV\(^\text{14}\)
- If symptoms do occur, they can include flu-like symptoms and fatigue\(^\text{14}\)
- Other symptoms may include: loss of appetite, muscle or joint pain, nausea, anxiety, depression, difficulty concentrating or dark urine/bright stools\(^\text{14}\)
- Approximately 60-80% of people infected with HCV have no symptoms at all\(^\text{15}\)

*For more information on HCV, please go to [http://www.stop-hepatitis-c.info](http://www.stop-hepatitis-c.info).*

**References**

8. Zhang HF, Mills D. HCV infection is associated with high comorbidity in Europe. Proceedings of the 60th Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases; 2009 30 Oct – 3 Nov; Boston, US.