



Disclosing Hepatitis Infection

A diagnosis of viral hepatitis can generate fear. Common feelings include:

- Fear of being treated differently
- Fear of illness or dependency
- Fear of infecting friends and family
- Fear of dying
- Fear of having hepatitis infection documented in their records
- Fear of denial of health and life insurance
- Fear of losing employment
- Fear of violence or emotional distress when telling a family member or intimate friend that they may have been put at risk.

The fears are based on perceived or real consequences of a hepatitis diagnosis. A greater understanding of viral hepatitis can alleviate some fears. Before discussing a diagnosis of hepatitis, it is important to think about the potential impact of disclosure in personal and professional situations.

Personal disclosure

Talking to family and friends about a hepatitis infection is important. Most people feel relieved and supported once they disclose their diagnosis to loved ones. However, the disclosure can be difficult for all involved. Some people associate hepatitis with drug use, sexual promiscuity and homosexuality and, unfortunately, these behaviors and situations are often stigmatized in the community. It is helpful to be 'ready' for the disclosure. Be ready emotionally- family and friends may need support to accept the diagnosis. Be ready with information- family and friends will be concerned and have questions.

Not everyone needs to know about the infection. Clients should consider the following before discussing a diagnosis of viral hepatitis with others:

- Why is it important to tell this person?
- Do I trust this person?
- Am I ready to answer their basic questions about hepatitis?
- Have I disclosed other personal things to this person? How did they react?

- Am I prepared for the person's reaction?
- Am I afraid this person may hurt me?

Legal disclosure

Most life and health insurance companies ask applicants if they have been tested for viral hepatitis. Other legal agreements may also require disclosure of hepatitis status. While it is tempting to withhold this information, it may be illegal to do so. Some doctors are willing to write a statement about a patient's health and life expectancy.

Professional disclosure

Disclosing hepatitis infection with co-workers and employers may bring relief and support, but it can also lead to subtle discrimination. HCV status in a business environment should be a carefully thought out process. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) offers legal protection in certain areas, but other, less obvious discrimination can occur.

The ADA allows for certain protections from discrimination in the workplace. The ADA describes disability as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual. A recent court ruling limited the reach of the ADA by ruling that a disability cannot be measured solely on the ability to do certain tasks at work, but must also be permanent or long lasting. It is unclear exactly how this will impact the ADA in the long term, but before disclosing medical status to an employer, an individual would be well-advised to consult with the ADA or a benefits counselor.

A person who is designated as disabled is entitled to protections from any practices in the workplace that could affect wages, benefits, application procedures, job assignments, promotions, etc.

However, having HCV does not automatically entitle one to these benefits. For example, if a person has asymptomatic HCV disease, they are not automatically entitled to protections. However, they may be entitled to benefits and protection if they are experiencing HCV