

## Update

# Chronic Viral Hepatitis

## *Combinations and Cocktails*

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Chronic viral hepatitis remains a significant problem in Canada.

In recent years, transmission of hepatitis C virus (HCV) has predominantly occurred via use of injection street drugs as opposed to contaminated blood products, which used to be the major risk factor.

Hepatitis B virus (HBV), although easily transmitted sexually and via street drugs, is endemic in many parts of the world, especially the Asia-Pacific region, and is transmitted vertically from mother to newborn or horizontally amongst toddlers.

Patients with chronic HCV or HBV are at risk of developing cirrhosis. Both viruses also have the oncogenic potential to produce hepatocellular carcinoma in those with cirrhosis or significant hepatic inflammation. Moreover, both HBV and HCV can cause systemic extrahepatic disease independent of the degree of hepatic inflammation.

Specific antiviral therapy for both HBV and HCV:

- requires prolonged durations of treatment,
- is not associated with permanent eradication in a significant number of patients,
- may be associated with significant adverse effects and
- is associated with significant economic cost.

Therefore, candidates for treatment must be carefully selected. In general, evidence of significant liver disease (as indicated by elevated liver enzymes or significant fibrosis on liver biopsy) and extrahepatic disease are indications for considering treatment.

In general, patients with chronic HCV must avoid anything other than the occasional alcoholic beverage.

### Lynn's case

- Lynn, 42, undergoes routine screening and is found to have a serum alanine aminotransferase (ALT) of 120 U/L.
- The alkaline phosphatase, total bilirubin, international normalized ratio and serum albumin are within normal limits.
- Her only complaint is fatigue and she does not have symptoms suggesting decompensated liver disease.
- Physical exam is unremarkable.
- Lynn reports a history of "mild depression," but has never sought medical attention for it.
- Her serum anti-hepatitis C virus is found to be positive.
- Her serum hepatitis B surface antigen is negative.
- There is a history of injection street drug use in the past, as well as previous alcohol abuse, but she has been abstinent for several years.



For more on Lynn, go to page 86.