

PRESS RELEASE

Thousands more people with hepatitis C to benefit from latest NICE guidance on drug treatments

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has today issued guidance recommending the use of two drugs (peginterferon alfa and ribavirin) for the treatment of people with mild chronic hepatitis C within the NHS.

Recent estimates suggest that approximately 200,000 to 500,000 people are infected with hepatitis C in England and Wales although only around 47,000 people have been diagnosed and only around 7000 treated. Current practice in most centres is to treat only those patients with moderate or severe symptoms. Today's guidance however states that:

- People with mild chronic hepatitis should also be offered combination therapy with peginterferon alfa and ribavirin within the licensed indications of these drugs.
- People with mild chronic hepatitis who are unable to tolerate ribavirin, or for whom ribavirin is contraindicated, should be offered peginterferon alfa monotherapy.
- The decision as to whether a person with mild chronic hepatitis C should be treated immediately or should wait until the disease has reached a moderate stage ('watchful waiting') should be made by the patient after fully informed consultation with the responsible clinician
- There is insufficient evidence to recommend combination therapy or monotherapy with peginterferon alfa for people with mild chronic hepatitis C who are under the age of 18 years, or those who have had a liver transplant.

Andrew Dillon, NICE Chief Executive and Executive Lead said: “We are recommending these drugs as the evidence suggests that treating patients with hepatitis C in its earlier stages when symptoms are milder can be effective at suppressing the virus and delaying disease progression. Treatment in these patients is also cost effective – for example early treatment might prevent the need for a costly and complicated liver transplant at a later stage.”

Charles Gore, Chief Executive of the Hepatitis C Trust said: “We welcome this guidance as it will significantly increase the number of people with hepatitis C who are eligible for treatment on the NHS. It is important that the guidance is implemented quickly throughout the NHS and we would call on all those involved to ensure patients are offered the opportunity to benefit from these treatments as soon as possible.”

Professor Graham Foster, consultant hepatologist at Barts and The London NHS Trust says “This guidance is good news for patients as it means all clinicians can now offer these effective new treatments at a much earlier stage, before significant liver damage has occurred. However the drugs used to treat hepatitis C do have some side effects, so it is important patients and doctors weigh up the risks and benefits before making an informed decision on when to start treatment.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors

1. The evidence in this appraisal relates to the extension of this treatment to people with mild chronic hepatitis C. For people with moderate or severe disease, the guidance in Technology Appraisal Guidance Number 75 (issued January 2004) still stands.
2. NICE estimates that around 3,500 more patients will decide to receive these treatments at a cost to the NHS of around £25 million per year.

About NICE

3. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is the independent organisation responsible for providing national guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention and treatment of ill health.
4. NICE produces guidance in three areas of health:
 - **public health** – guidance on the promotion of good health and the prevention of ill health for those working in the NHS, local authorities and the wider public and voluntary sector
 - **health technologies** – guidance on the use of new and existing medicines, treatments and procedures within the NHS
 - **clinical practice** – guidance on the appropriate treatment and care of people with specific diseases and conditions within the NHS.

About the Hepatitis C Trust

5. The Hepatitis C Trust is the national charity for all those affected by hepatitis C. For more information see www.hepctrust.org.uk or call 020 7089 6220.