

PRESS RELEASE

People with chronic hepatitis C to benefit from guidance on new drugs and treatments

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has today issued guidance on the use of interferon alpha, peginterferon alfa – a newer, longer-acting version of interferon alfa, which doesn't need to be taken as often – and ribavirin for the treatment of chronic hepatitis C within the NHS in England and Wales.

NICE guidance will help healthcare professionals and people with hepatitis C to decide where these treatments add value so that those patients who can benefit from the treatments will be able to do so, no matter where they live in England and Wales.

NICE has made the following recommendations:

- Combination therapy with peginterferon alfa and ribavirin should be used to treat people aged 18 years or older who have moderate to severe chronic hepatitis C if they:
 - have not been treated before with either interferon alfa or peginterferon alfa, and/or
 - have been treated before with interferon alfa but not with peginterferon alfa, and/or
 - have been treated with peginterferon alfa monotherapy but it did not work, or the virus came back after treatment finished.
- The length of the treatment depends on the HCV genotype and how well a person initially responds to the drugs.

- People who are currently being treated with interferon alfa may be switched to peginterferon alfa.
- People who cannot take ribavirin, or have bad side effects from it, should be treated with peginterferon alfa monotherapy.
- People who are likely to have complications from the procedure do not need to have a liver biopsy to find out how extensive their liver damage is before treatment is started.

Andrew Dillon, NICE Chief Executive and Executive Lead said: "This appraisal is another example of NICE working to ensure that effective new treatments are made available to patients across the NHS. The process NICE follows is genuinely consultative and involves bringing all of the evidence together and engaging with professionals and patients. Today's guidance should lead to a faster and more uniform uptake of these important new treatments."

Charles Gore, Chief Executive of the Hepatitis C Trust said: "The Hepatitis C Trust is delighted that NICE has approved these drugs for use in the NHS as they represent an important advance in the treatment of hepatitis C, a condition which we estimate affects 400,000 people in the UK. The guidance will be welcomed by patients who now have the right to receive the best drugs available to treat this condition."

Ends

For more information contact Fraser Woodward on 020 7067 5905 and 07879 846 787. Out of hours press office number - 07775 583 813.

Notes to Editors

1. Today's guidance updates and replaces Technology Appraisal Guidance Number 14 (issued October 2000) which recommended the earlier non-pegylated treatments for hepatitis C.

About NICE

2. NICE is part of the NHS. It is the independent organisation responsible for providing national guidance on treatments and care for those using the NHS in England and Wales. Its guidance is for healthcare professionals and patients and their carers to help them make decisions about treatment and healthcare. For further information about NICE you can visit www.nice.org.uk.
3. NICE produces guidance in three areas of health:
 - the use of new and existing medicines and treatments within the NHS in England and Wales – technology appraisals.
 - the appropriate treatment and care of patients with specific diseases and conditions within the NHS in England and Wales – clinical guidelines.

- whether interventional procedures used for diagnosis or treatment are safe enough and work well enough for routine use – interventional procedures.

NICE also funds three enquiries that undertake research into the way patients are treated to identify ways of improving the quality of care (the investigations are known as confidential enquiries).

4. NICE guidance and recommendations are prepared by independent groups that include professionals working in the NHS and people who are familiar with the issues affecting patients and carers.

About technology appraisals

5. Technology appraisals are recommendations on the use of new and existing medicines and treatments within the NHS in England and Wales, such as:
 - medicines (for example, drugs)
 - medical devices (for example, hearing aids or inhalers)
 - diagnostic techniques (tests used to identify diseases)
 - surgical procedures (for example, repairing hernias)
 - health promotion activities (for example, patient education models for diabetes).
5. Our technology appraisal recommendations are prepared by an independent Committee, that includes healthcare professionals working in the NHS and people who are familiar with the issues affecting patients and carers. The Committee considers the evidence on the clinical and cost effectiveness of the technology – this includes hearing the views of, and evidence from, clinical health professionals, experts and patients.
6. NHS organisations in England and Wales have to make the resources and facilities available to enable NICE guidance to be implemented. In January 2002 the Government announced a legal obligation for the NHS to provide funding for treatments and drugs recommended by NICE as a part of its technology appraisals work programme.

About the Hepatitis C Trust

7. The Hepatitis C Trust is the only national UK charity devoted to hepatitis C and was set up by people with the illness who were concerned by the lack of information and support available. The aims of the Trust are to help those with hepatitis C, primarily by providing them with both information and support; to raise public awareness of the disease so that the 9 out of 10 people in the UK who have it but still don't know come forward for testing; to campaign for better treatment and care; and to initiate research. For further information phone 020 7422 6009 or email info@hepctrust.org.