

Take Action Against Hepatitis C

For People in Recovery From Mental Illness or Addiction



Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration



www.samhsa.gov • 1-877-SAMHSA-7 (1-877-726-4727)

Attention treatment providers in behavioral health programs!

This booklet is intended for use with clients who:

- Are at risk for infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV).
- Have been identified as HCV antibody positive.
- Have been diagnosed with hepatitis C.

Select the pertinent pages to share with clients to support their particular hepatitis-related educational needs.



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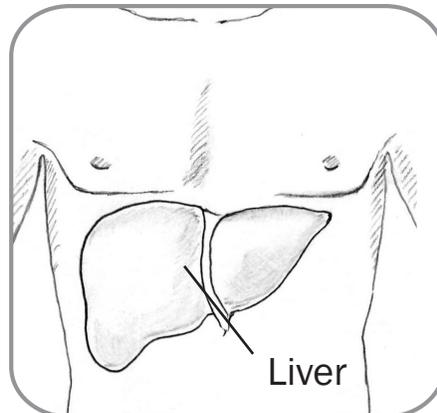
Take Action Against Hepatitis C

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Respect your liver.

- The liver *cleans* **toxins*** out of your bloodstream.
- It *makes* substances your body uses to maintain good health, such as bile for digestion and clotting factors to stop bleeding.
- It *processes* medicines and other substances, so they can be used by your body.
- It *stores* sugars, fats, and vitamins and releases them when you need them.



**It does many things to keep
your body healthy.**

*substances that may be harmful to your body

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Why should I care about my liver? It doesn't do anything special, like the heart or lungs do.

Not true, the liver does so much, you can't live without it.



Know the facts about hepatitis C.

If you are infected with hepatitis C virus, you are at risk of developing hepatitis C disease. Some people recover from the infection, but most develop **chronic hepatitis**.*

Hepatitis C can make you feel weak, tired, and feverish. You might also feel bloated and full. You might lose your appetite and lose weight, too. Your skin and eyes might take on a yellow tint.

But it can take years for these symptoms to show up. When they do, the liver is already damaged. Untreated hepatitis C can result in severe illness or death.

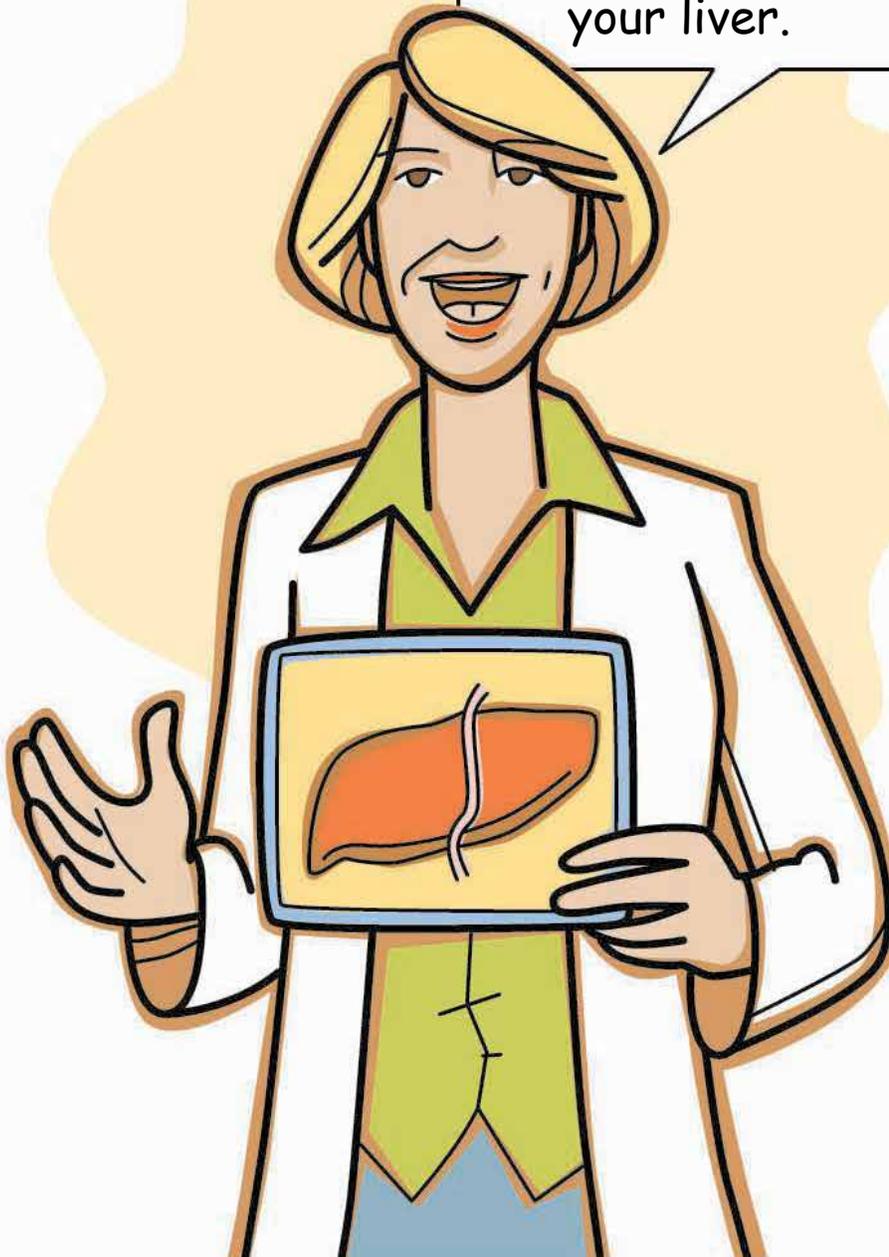
It's a silent disease—many people have it but don't know it.

*hepatitis lasting 6 months or more

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Hepatitis C is **inflammation*** of the liver caused by a virus.

You might not notice symptoms for years while the disease attacks and destroys your liver.



*swelling, tenderness, and pain

Avoid hepatitis C infection.

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) lives in the blood. This means that if the blood of someone who has the virus gets inside your body, you can get infected, too. Even small specks of blood can transmit infection.

Injecting drugs is the most common way people get infected. Blood can be transmitted by sharing drug equipment and rinse water. Tattoo needles that are not **sterilized*** also can transmit HCV.

Cuts, sores, burns, or other wounds can be pathways for infected blood to get inside you. Sharing razors or toothbrushes also creates a risk for HCV transmission.

It is possible to pick up HCV from having sex with somebody who is infected, although this is uncommon. However, the rate of infection is higher in people who have many sex partners.

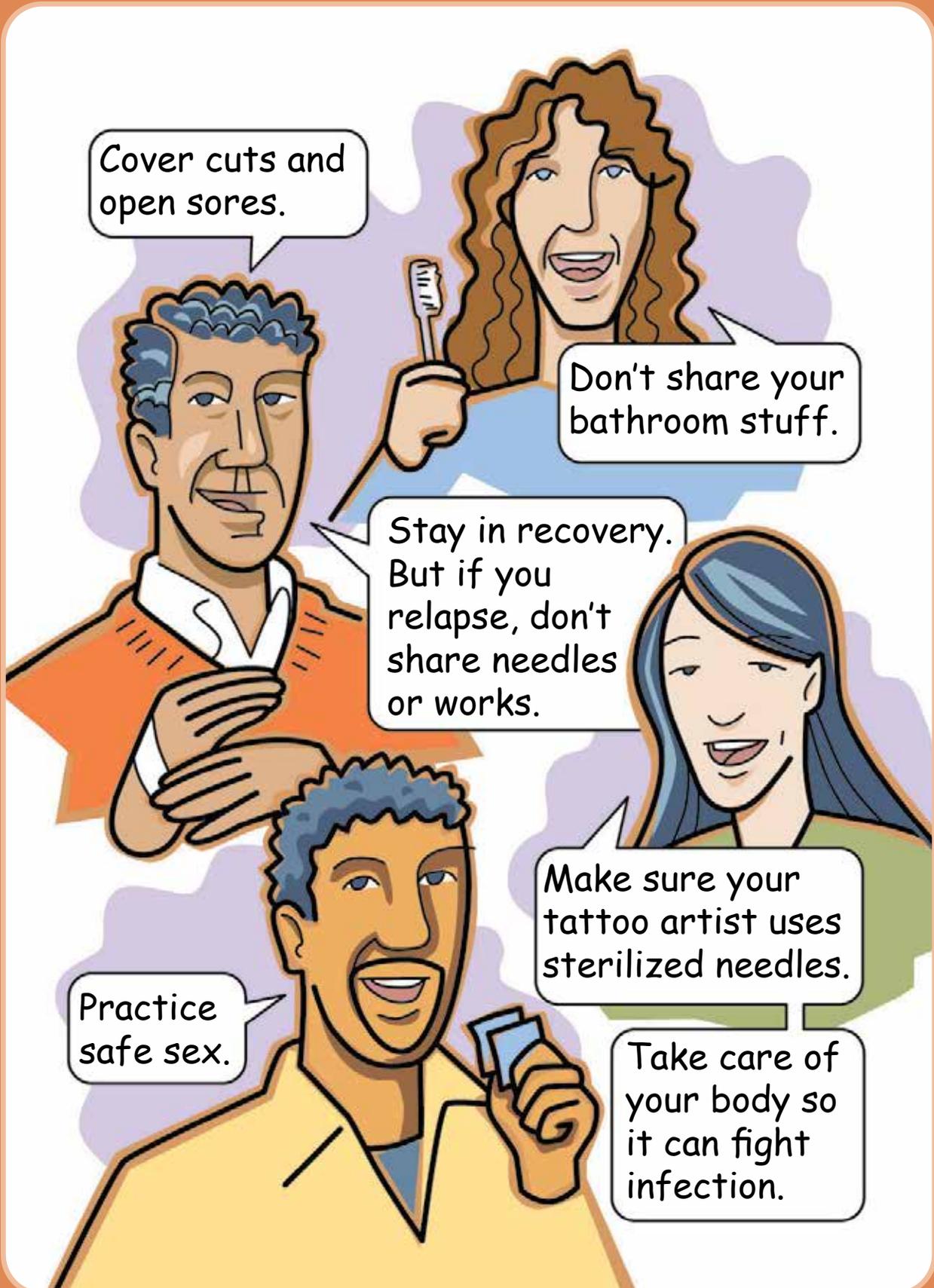
You CANNOT get HCV by:

- Sneezing or coughing.
- Sharing eating utensils or drinking glasses.
- Hugging and other forms of casual contact.

A few simple guidelines can help you stay HCV free.

*made germ free

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Get screened for hepatitis C.

If you have a history of addiction, you are at higher risk for hepatitis C. That makes it a good idea to get **screened**.* This will let you know if you have been infected with the virus that causes hepatitis.

It's better to know if you have been infected than to stay ignorant.

*tested to see if you have been exposed to hepatitis virus

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I feel fine. Why should I care if I'm infected with hepatitis C virus?



You could get sick and die before your time.

I don't want that. Not after the work I've put into recovery.

Face your fears about hepatitis screening.

A small blood sample is used to check for hepatitis C virus (HCV). The blood is either drawn from a vein or obtained from a fingerstick.

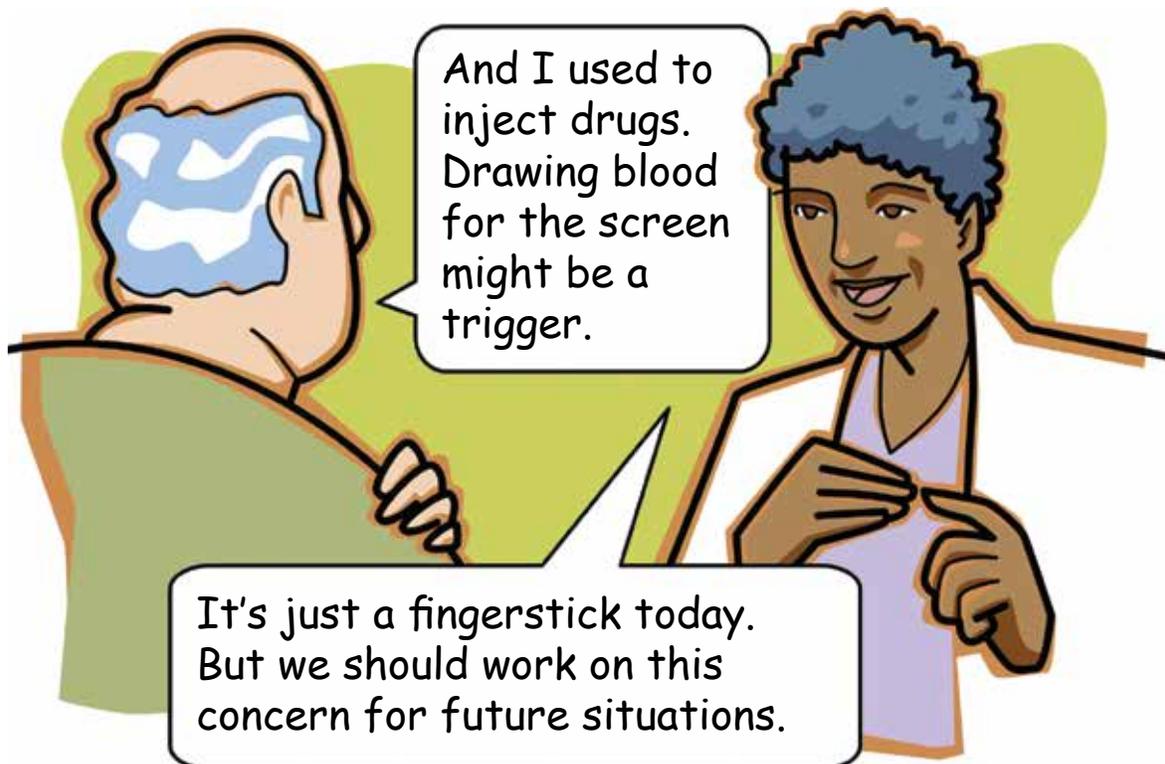
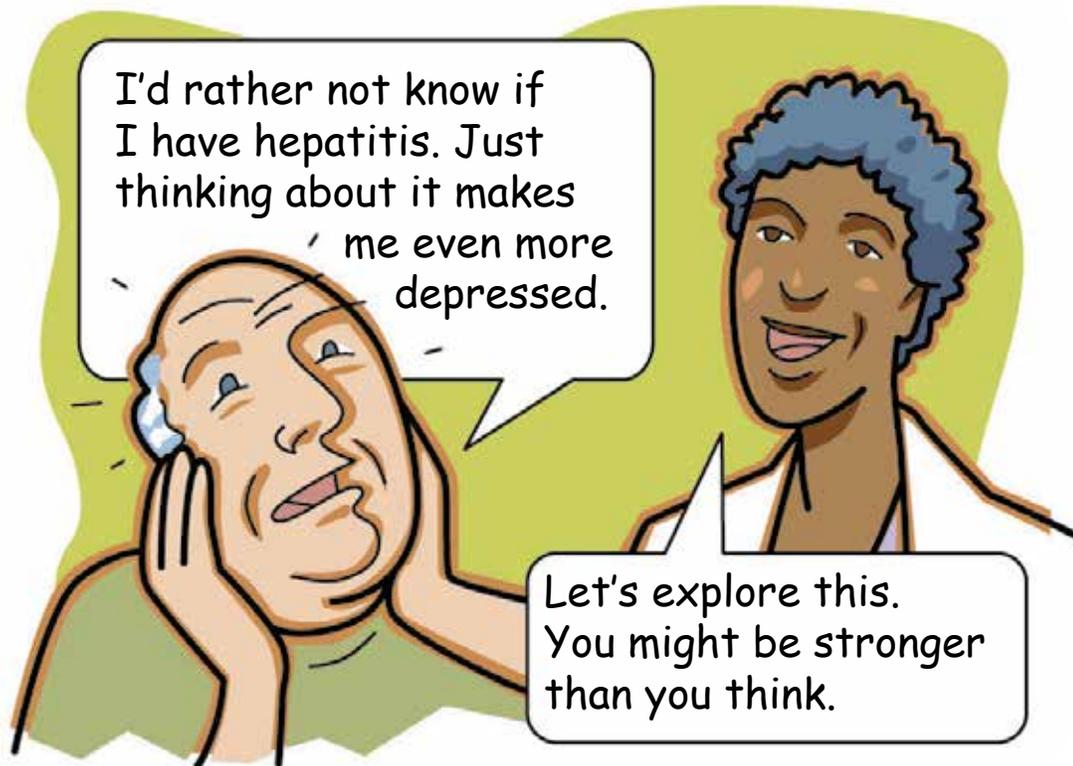
A negative screen means you have not been infected with HCV. That's good news, and you can take steps to avoid future infection. You should get rescreened every year if you continue to use drugs or take part in high-risk sex.

A positive screen means you are infected or that you were once infected but aren't now. If you test positive, you will need to get a medical exam to find out if the HCV has stayed in your body and turned into a chronic infection. If it has, you need to make sure you aren't spreading that infection to others. Even if you learn that you no longer have the infection, you will want to protect yourself from becoming infected again.

Pages 6 and 7 give ideas on how to protect yourself against HCV infection or reinfection. You can use these same ideas to avoid passing the infection to others.

**Your concerns are important.
Screening is important, too.**

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Get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B if advised to do so.

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. The hepatitis C virus (HCV) can only be prevented by avoiding contact with **contaminated blood**.*

However, there are vaccines that work against two other types of hepatitis—hepatitis A virus (HAV) and hepatitis B virus (HBV). These two viruses usually pose less of a danger than HCV. However, they can sometimes lead to serious health problems.

If you have never been infected with HAV or HBV, your healthcare providers may advise you to get the vaccines. The shots for HAV and HBV can be given separately or combined. Either way, you get a series of shots, not just one. You need to have all the shots to get the protection.

Complete the full series of shots.

*blood that has HCV in it

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Get a full medical exam for hepatitis C if advised to do so.

If your screening indicates that you might have chronic hepatitis C, you will be advised to get a full medical exam. This is to obtain information on how far along your disease is, your **prognosis**,* and the risks and benefits of hepatitis treatment for you.

The exam may include these blood tests:

- Liver panel (also known as liver function tests)—to find out about the health of your liver
- Viral load tests—to get an idea of how you might respond to treatment
- Genotype tests—to find out the exact kind of hepatitis virus you have

You may also be advised to undergo an exam by **ultrasound**** or **biopsy.***** These exams are done to find out how much damage has been done to your liver.

You may be tempted to put off these tests. But now is better than later. It's in your best interest to learn how your body is being affected by hepatitis infection. And the test results are important for making treatment decisions.

The exam will help determine your treatment options.

*a prediction of the probable course and outcome of your hepatitis

**Pictures are taken that show the inside of your body.

***A tiny piece of your liver is removed.

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Will the biopsy hurt?

I'm afraid of pain. I might have an anxiety attack.

You might be sore afterward where we make the incision.

Let's talk about how we can help you through this.



Consider your treatment options if you have hepatitis C.

If you have hepatitis C, you may be advised to undergo antiviral treatment. This means that you will take strong medicines for several months to try to kill the virus.

There are several types of antiviral treatment. Some of the newer treatments have fewer side effects and are very effective.

Ask your healthcare provider about the pros and cons of the different treatment options. It will be your choice whether to go ahead with your recommended treatment, to delay treatment until a later time, or not to have it. Your choice will depend on several factors, such as the stage of your disease and other information you learn from your medical exam and test results.

Your current life circumstances also will factor into your decision. Some people choose to get stronger in their recovery before dealing with antiviral treatment. But many people in recovery choose to start treatment right away.

**Your recovery counselor
can help you think through
your decisions.**

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You decide for yourself if antiviral treatment is worth it at this point in your life.

You bet it is. Antiviral treatment is going to be part of my overall recovery!

My body's pretty sick, but my head's in the right place. I'm going ahead, too.



Talk to your recovery counselor if you need help getting antiviral treatment.

Antiviral treatment for hepatitis C can be successful even if you:

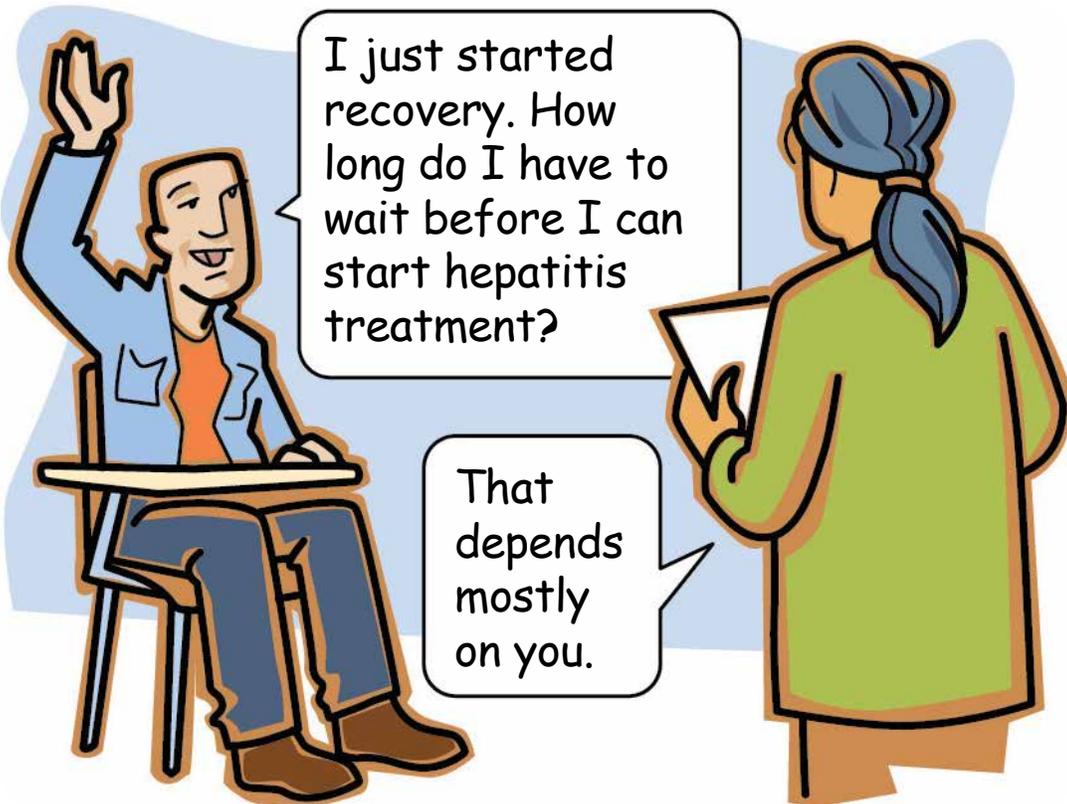
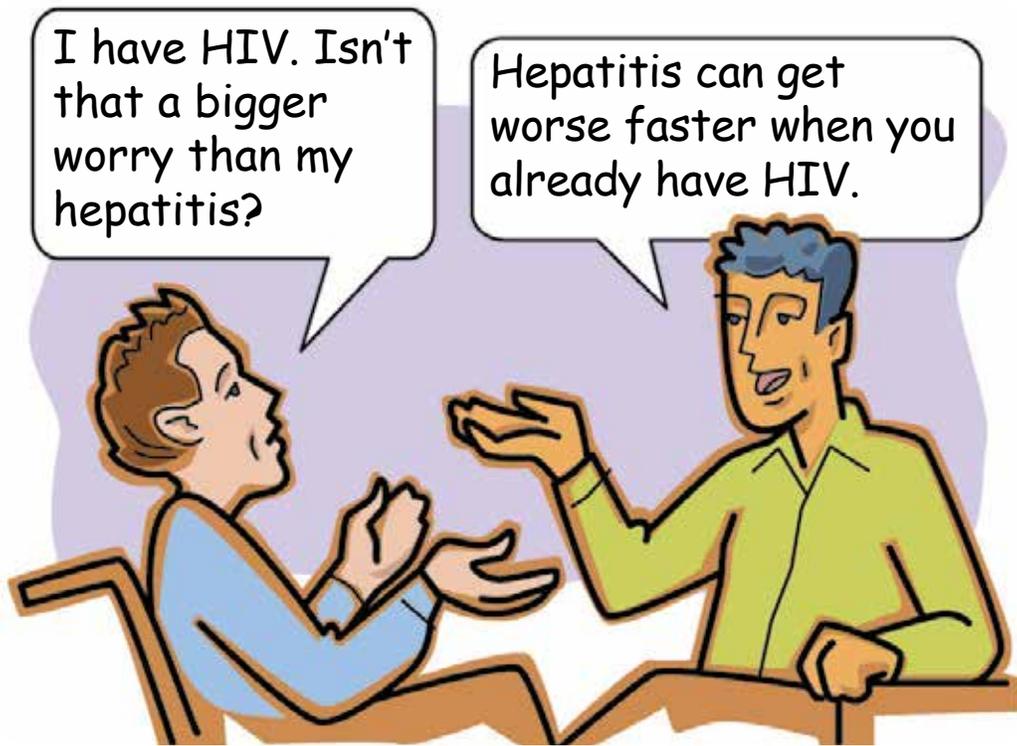
- Are affected by mental illness.
- Have not yet stopped active substance use.
- Are new to recovery from alcohol or drug use.
- Have had relapses.
- Are on medicines for mental illness or addiction treatment.*
- Have another disease, such as HIV/AIDS.

Your counselor can help you talk with your medical providers if you feel you are being unfairly excluded from antiviral treatment.

A history of addiction or mental illness and HIV status are not reasons to be denied antiviral treatment.

*Sometimes a medicine does not work properly when you take it with another medicine. This is called an interaction. If you take both antiviral and recovery medicines, your hepatitis care providers will monitor you closely for interactions. If one occurs, your medicines may be adjusted.

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If you have hepatitis C, antiviral treatment can make you feel better than you have in a long time.

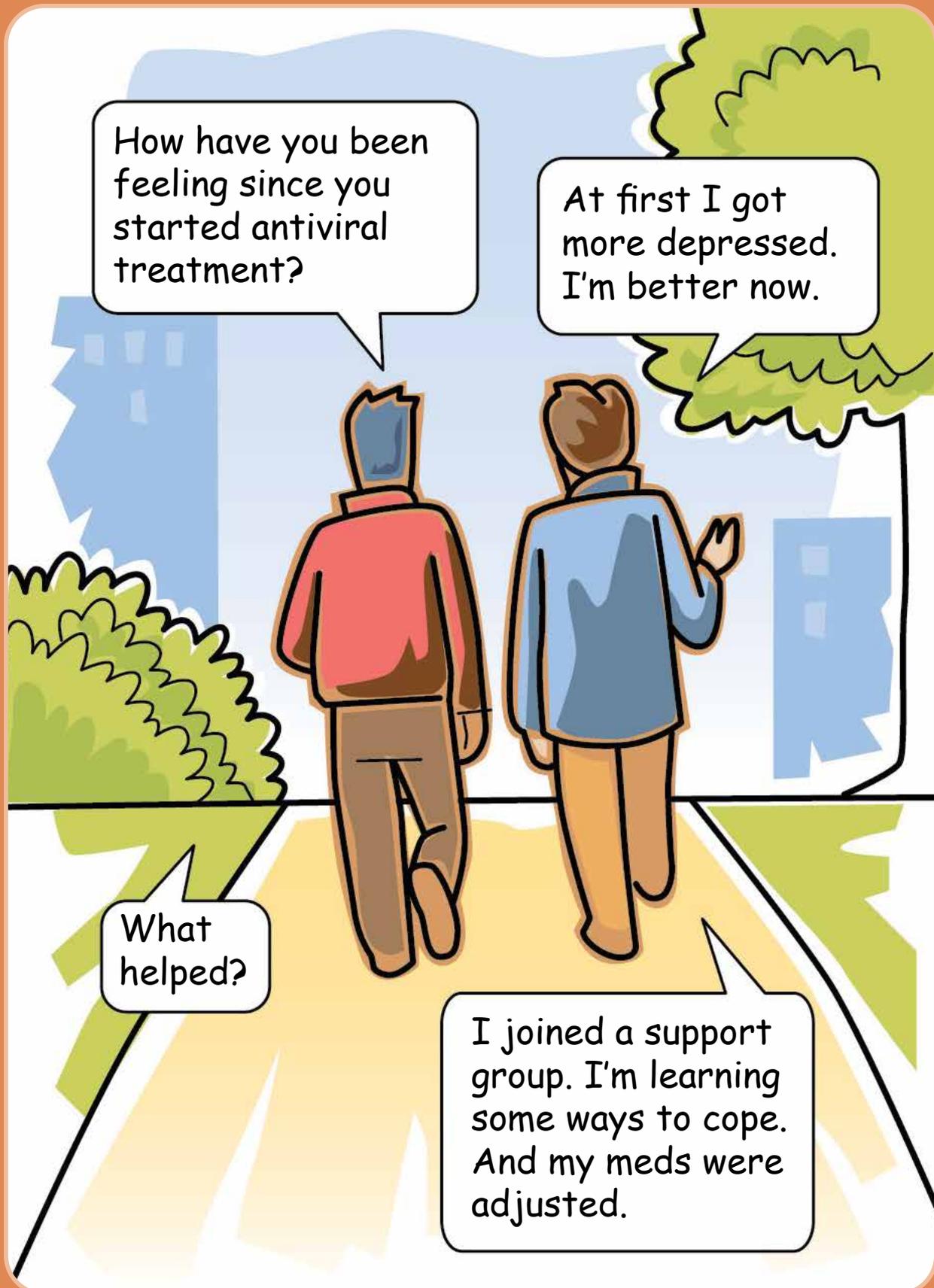
If you have undiagnosed hepatitis C, you might not feel well without knowing why. This can make you depressed. When your hepatitis C is treated, you should begin to feel better. This can help lift your mood.

In some cases, though, antiviral treatment for hepatitis C can trigger **mental health symptoms*** or make them worse. Let your care providers know if you need help with them.

Your care providers will work with you for good mental health while you undergo treatment.

*anxiety, irritability, depression

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Get the facts about liver transplant.

If your liver has been very badly damaged by hepatitis C, you may be told you need a liver transplant. There are waiting lists, however. You will be considered for a transplant waiting list based on:

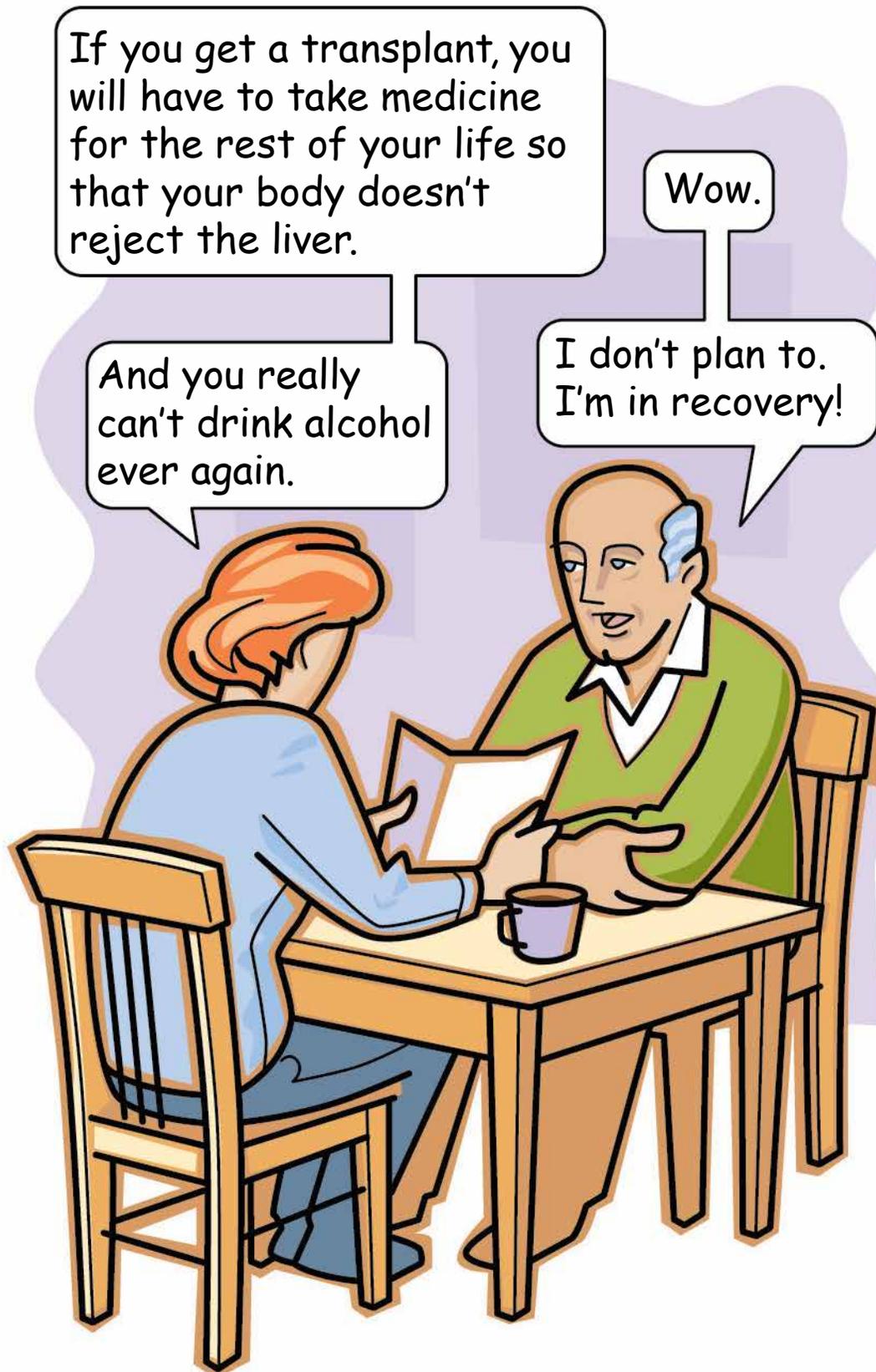
- Your need for a new liver.
- Your willingness to go through the operation.
- Your willingness to make lifestyle changes.

You can be on medicines for mental illness or addiction treatment and still qualify for a liver transplant. But you can't drink alcohol. The effects of alcohol on the liver are too damaging for a person who has hepatitis.

Your medical care providers can talk with you about whether a liver transplant is possible. If it is, they can help you get on a transplant center waiting list. You will need to keep in recovery and stay as healthy as possible while you wait to hear that a transplant liver is ready.

It's a big decision, and you'll need to think it over carefully.

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**Take good care of yourself
if you have hepatitis C.**

**Having hepatitis is
one more reason to stay
solid in recovery.**

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*for example, large doses of Tylenol (acetaminophen)



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