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living with HEPATITIS C

a series of stories written
by people living with
hepatitis C

..... Jason Part 4

Preventing the spread of HCV

With proper precautions the spread of HCV can be prevented. Health care and public safety workers need to take barrier precautions such as wearing rubber gloves when dealing with blood and other bodily fluids and take extreme caution when handling needles and other sharp instruments. Health care workers should be vaccinated against HBV. Blood, including dried blood, and other bodily fluid spills should be cleaned promptly and appropriately. Intravenous drug users should never share needles, water, and other drug use paraphernalia. Persons infected with the disease should not donate blood, plasma, or sperm. However, HCV-infected individuals are in certain circumstances able to donate organs (Medscape Today, 2003). HCV infected individuals should never share toiletries such as shaving razors, nail clippers, and toothbrushes that have been blood exposed. Due to the slight risk of sexual transmission, those having sex with multiple partners or not in a long-term monogamous relationship should practice safe sex and wear a latex condom every time they have sex (CDC, 2007).

HCV has had a tremendous impact on my life. It has affected the way that I interact socially and with my family. I make sure that my toothbrush is kept apart from the rest of my family's toothbrushes. I do not share my shaving razors, nail clippers, or any other item that has been exposed to my blood. I am extremely conscious of not letting anyone near my blood, and I dress any open wounds appropriately. There are many behaviors that I have changed since I was diagnosed with HCV.

HCV has affected those around me, both before and after treatment. For the most part, my family and friends were supportive, even when I was extremely irritated and attempted to isolate myself. However, there were those around me who treated me *differently*. I had co-workers and acquaintances who seemed to distance themselves from me when they learned that I was HCV positive. I also encountered medical providers whose demeanor seemed to change when they became aware of my diagnosis. I could almost see their shift in mentality from dealing with an average patient, to one who is an ex-drug user.

There is a social stigmatization that is attached to HCV infection. In the January 2006 issue of *Hepatitis Magazine*, an informal web poll was conducted regarding stigma and viral hepatitis. Over fifty percent of the respondents reported being treated differently due to their disease (Conrad, 2006). I have experienced feelings of rejection, and I have internalized shame. I am aware that I have a disease that, regardless of the fact of sustained virological response, can still be transmitted to others. The fact that I probably acquired HCV through intravenous drug use adds to my internalized shame. In society's eye, I am still an ex-injecting drug user. It is hard for me not to think of myself as "infectious." All of these feelings are a daily part of my experience with HCV. I am conscious of these feelings; however, I am also conscious of the dramatic positive changes that I have made in my life.

I have come a long way since I first entered into recovery and was diagnosed with HCV. I have progressed professionally, and I currently work as an Implementation Specialist for SEIU UHW-West & Joint Employer Education Fund, coordinating adult education programs for healthcare workers. I gained sole custody of my daughter from my first marriage when she was four and have raised her for the last six years. My wife and I have purchased a home, and I am well on my way toward earning a bachelor's degree from the University of San Francisco. I have ambitions of continuing on to law school. I have not allowed the disease of addiction or Hepatitis C to hinder the way that I live.

Hepatitis C affects approximately 170 million people world-wide, and it affects me personally. Not a single day goes by that I do not stop and think about the disease, if only for a moment. This blood-borne virus has changed my life both negatively and positively. The negative is that it is quite possible that I can have complications later in life due to the slow progression of the disease. The positive is that I now do not take life for granted. I live healthy. I am coming up on ten years clean, and I know that this is the

prerequisite to my remaining healthy. I now deal with the less-frequent bouts of internalized shame and negative self-perceptions that HCV has brought into my life. I am conscious of the success that my life is today. I truly believe that my attitude has determined my altitude.

– Jason C. Toro
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The information in this fact sheet is designed to help you understand and manage HCV and is not intended as medical advice. All persons with HCV should consult a medical practitioner for diagnosis and treatment of HCV.

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