

HEPATITIS C VIRUS FREE BECAUSE OF NEW TREATMENTS

The new hepatitis C treatments have worked for a 53-year-old Wiradjuri woman who has had the virus since 1994. Cathy is now free of the hepatitis C virus and its symptoms.

Cathy was diagnosed with hepatitis C after entering a rehab, where they ran tests for hepatitis C, which returned positive results for the virus.

Over the years, she has suffered from tiredness and other symptoms from living with hepatitis C. Cathy has always monitored her virus through regular blood tests, though never accessed treatment.

However since January this year, after finishing treatment with the new direct acting antivirals (DAAs), Cathy is now hepatitis C free.

“Luckily I have kids and I’ve never really been a drinker. When I moved to the Riverina, my new doctor asked why I hadn’t looked into new treatments. They said why don’t I give new treatments a go because there are new drugs coming out all the time,” Cathy said.

“My GP at the time referred me to the local hepatitis treatment clinic. They worked with me and organised my specialist appointment and had me then transferred to a closer GP at the Aboriginal Medical Service (AMS).”

“I started the new treatments in 2015 because I was able to access them on compassionate grounds before they became available on the PBS, and I finished my treatment at the beginning of the year. After the full course I have no viral load in my system and now all indications are that I’m cured.”

Cathy contracted hepatitis C from sharing injecting equipment like needles. “In 1994 there were no needle and syringe programs,” she said.

“I’m clear now and still using but I’m not sharing and there’s no need to nowadays with the programs that are about. I was lucky I only got hepatitis C and not HIV because we would share needles, sharpening them on a matchbox. That’s what you did back then.”

Cathy didn’t have many side effects from the new treatments. She was put on Viekira Pak and at the beginning of the course, she had diarrhoea and headaches for the first couple of days which then went away.

“My body got used to the treatments and the only real side effect that I had until the end of the treatment was sun sensitivity. Other than that, things tasted a little different but that cleared up too,” she said.

While she didn’t let hepatitis C rule her life, she is relieved to be free of the exhaustion it caused.

“I didn’t focus on hepatitis C but now I’m not exhausted anymore and don’t need to worry so much about it,” she said.

“I’d advise anyone who might be at risk of getting the virus to 100 percent check it out and get tested; it’s not scary and only a simple blood test. Then I’d say try the new treatments. If one drug doesn’t suit you, another one will.”

Cathy is thankful to her AMS for the support she's received since moving to the Riverina and for helping her during the new treatments.

"They've been really supportive," she said.

Cathy would eventually like to work in the health field and study at TAFE. At present, she is focused on getting herself and her family more settled.

The direct acting antivirals have been available on the PBS since 1 March 2016. Anyone over 18 years living in Australia who has a Healthcare Card can access the new treatments. There are no restrictions, such as if you're injecting drugs or have liver damage.

The DAAs are a breakthrough in treating Hepatitis C because they can cure up to 95% of people who take them. The treatments are tablets, and there is no need for injections. The treatment lasts, in most cases, for 12 weeks.

For more information on the new treatments talk to your doctor, your AMS or call the Hepatitis Infoline 1800 803 990.

You can also find out more by visiting the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council website <http://www.ahmrc.org.au/hepc.php> or Hepatitis NSW <https://www.hep.org.au/hep-c-treatment/>