

LOW SIDE EFFECTS, NEW HOPE OF CURE

A 46-year-old Kamilaroi woman living in north western NSW is finding hope for a cure for her hepatitis C in the new treatments available in Australia since 1 March 2016.

Kerri is into her fifth week of the new treatments and side effects have been minimal.

“I’ve had a few headaches and a little bit of skin irritation but the side effects are different for everyone,” Kerri said.

“I’d say give the new treatments a go and don’t give up. Stay off the grog if you’re drinking and get the new treatments done,” Kerri said.

The new treatments are called DAAs (direct acting antivirals) and you can find out about them by talking to your doctor, nurse or Aboriginal Health Worker at your Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs) or GP clinic.

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 are no injections. The treatment lasts, in most cases, for 12 weeks.

“I’ve always got hope,” Kerri said. “Hepatitis C can happen to anyone and these new treatments offer hope of a cure.”

When she was first diagnosed, Kerri didn’t know she had hepatitis C. She was in Tamworth visiting friends and also had sorry business. She’d had a drink and returned home to rest and became so sick that her organs began to shut down. Kerri was around 38 at the time.

“I didn’t know I was so sick but they flew me straight to Sydney and put me in an induced coma. They didn’t think I’d make it,” Kerri said.

“When I recovered they told me I had hepatitis C and I was very shocked. I’m an alcoholic and just thought it was grog sickness. I don’t know where I contracted it but I did get backyard tattoos when I was younger, and I also used for a while when I was about 20 years old.”

“I wouldn’t recommend anyone getting backyard tattoos or sharing needles.”

Hepatitis C is spread when blood from a person infected with the hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone else. Some ways this can happen is through sharing equipment used to inject drugs or sharing equipment used for backyard tattooing.

Kerri has learned to live with hepatitis C.

“I have a good attitude to hepatitis C. Generally it doesn’t worry me and I don’t worry it,” Kerri said.

“I’ve also recovered from cervical cancer and my attitude is ‘don’t sit in a corner and worry about it. Get on with your life’. I look at life differently now, especially now I’m off the grog. I have three grandkids to look after and they keep me busy,” Kerri said.

Kerri found out about the DAAs through her Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service.

“They’ve been really supportive,” Kerri said.

“In August I’ll have my bloods checked again and I’m hoping my platelets (a part of the blood that helps to stop bleeding) are good.”

She said it’s important to get tested for hepatitis C and to learn all you can about it.

“I knew about hepatitis A, B, C but didn’t know about all the different strains of hep C. No-one told me anything about it when I was first diagnosed and you need to get all the information you can.”

People who think they might have hep C can get tested by a doctor at the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service or GP clinic. Your doctor can also help you find out more about the new hepatitis C treatments, or call the Hepatitis Infoline 1800 803 990.

Anyone over 18 years and living in Australia who has a Healthcare Card can access the new treatments. There are no restrictions on access, so you can still get treated if you are injecting drugs or have liver damage.

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