

New, Better Treatments for Hepatitis C

Since 2013, Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) treatment has changed significantly with approval of six new agents or fixed drug combinations. These treatments are far better than any previously available, with cure rates of over 90 percent for most people.

“Until recently, available treatments were lengthy, had serious side effects, and didn’t work very well,” says Cyndi Bakir, Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS), Liver Clinic Care Coordinator at the San Francisco VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS). “In comparison, the new treatments consist of pills only, cause minimal side effects, and have much better cure rates. The length of HCV treatment has decreased to 12 weeks for most people.”

Because of the high cost of these new drugs and the fact that liver damage progresses slowly in many patients, many organizations targeted patients for treatment only after significant scarring of the liver or early cirrhosis had occurred.

In contrast, SFVAHCS researchers contributed to work showing that the optimal time of treatment should be earlier. National guidelines have now evolved to allow treatment for everyone with HCV, and SFVAHCS encourages

all patients with HCV to come for treatment.

“Curing the Hepatitis C virus stops ongoing damage to liver cells,” says Bakir. “Most people with Hepatitis C don’t have any symptoms. The only way to know if you have it is to request a blood test.”

Veterans enrolled in VA health care at the San Francisco VA Medical Center (SFVAMC) can call Bakir at (415) 221-4810, ext. 2-4771 and ask to be screened for HCV. Patients at our six VA community clinics can call their primary care provider and request a lab test for HCV. For community clinic patients, liver specialists conduct visits from SFVAMC using Video Telehealth through a novel program called SCAN-ECHO, that assists local physicians in caring for patients with HCV. Medication and lab tests are available locally at the clinics.

The SFVAHCS Liver Clinic team also includes two hepatologists, a nurse practitioner, a clinical pharmacist, and a psychologist. They hold clinics on multiple days of the week, including group treatment clinics and drop-in follow-up clinics. The SFVAHCS Infectious Disease Clinic also has a team of specialists that provides specialized care for Veterans with HIV and HCV co-infection,

because of complex drug-to-drug interactions that can occur with the combination of HIV and Hep C treatments. The clinics work closely together to determine the optimal HCV treatment regimen for each Veteran.

Nationwide, the VA leads the country in hepatitis screening, testing, treatment, research, and prevention.

The SFVAHCS Liver Clinic team is a significant contributor and consultant for the VA’s National Hepatitis C Resource Center, where national educational products on HCV are developed, including treatment guidelines and clinical tools for providers, and medication handouts for patients. SFVAHCS investigators conduct research in partnership with the University of California, San Francisco, and other VAs around the country, fostering excellence and scientific collaboration among its members.

“Our message to Veterans is, get tested and get treated,” says Bakir. “If you haven’t been tested for Hepatitis C, call me and I can arrange for you to be tested. We want to make your access to care as easy as possible.”

For more information about HCV, visit www.hepatitis.va.gov.

SEIZED: Inside the Mystery of Epilepsy

Did you know that the San Francisco VA Health Care System (SFVAHCS) is a national leader in the treatment of epilepsy? Learn more about how SFVAHCS providers are helping Veterans cope with epilepsy through innovative research and treatment in the upcoming documentary, **SEIZED: Inside the Mystery of Epilepsy**.

Three million Americans have epilepsy. It can cause terrifying and disabling seizures that come without warning, at any time, in many different forms. For almost one third of all patients, epilepsy is uncontrollable, unremitting, and all consuming. Even as doctors and patients push the frontiers of treatment forward, a fundamental question remains – what causes epilepsy?

The documentary features **Karen Parko, MD**, inaugural director of the VA National Epilepsy Centers of Excellence and a longtime provider at the San Francisco VA Medical Center. **The documentary will air on KQED World on May 13 at 7 a.m. and at 1 p.m.** You can also view the documentary online at <http://to.pbs.org/1UzTb5K>.

San Francisco VA Downtown Clinic to Host Women Veterans Open House/Health Fair

The San Francisco VA Downtown Clinic, located at 401 3rd Street (at Harrison) will host an Open House and Health Fair for Women Veterans on **Wednesday, May 11, 2016, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.**

Any and all women who have served in the military are encouraged to attend. Children are welcome.

There will be information about VA services for women, basic health screenings, chair massage, and refreshments. Additionally, a limited amount of walk-in, on-the-spot health care appointments will be offered by onsite providers for

eligible Women Veterans on a first come, first served basis.

Women Veterans can learn more about their eligibility for VA medical benefits, stress reduction, pain control, substance use, and receive job hunting tips and assistance.

Unenrolled eligible Women Veterans may apply for VA services and benefits onsite.

For more information about this event, call the San Francisco VA Downtown Clinic at (415) 281-5102.

Do You Know the Signs of a Stroke?

May is Stroke Awareness Month. Stroke is a disease that affects the arteries to the brain. It's the fifth leading cause of death and a major cause of disability in the U.S., per the American Heart Association.

Stroke can be caused either by a clot blocking the flow of blood to the brain or by a blood vessel rupturing and preventing blood flow to the brain. A "mini stroke" is caused by a temporary clot.

If someone is having a stroke, it's critical to get medical attention right away. Call 9-1-1. Immediate treatment may minimize the long-term effects of a stroke and even prevent death. When you can spot the signs of a stroke, you'll know that you need to call 9-1-1.

"F.A.S.T." is an easy way to remember sudden signs and symptoms of stroke:

"F" is for Face Drooping - Does one side of the face droop or is it numb? Ask the person to smile. Is the person's face uneven?

"A" is for Arm Weakness - Is one arm weak or numb? Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

"S" is for Speech Difficulty - Is speech slurred? Is the person unable to speak or hard to understand?

"T" is for Time to Call 9-1-1. - If someone shows any of these symptoms, even if the symptoms go away, call 9-1-1 and get the person to the hospital immediately.

