



My liver disease  
doesn't keep me  
from going out.  
Stigma does.

**liver.ca**  
Canadian Liver Foundation  
Fondation canadienne du foie

## What is this document all about?

This short document was developed because we wanted to create a simple learning resource for you and the rest of the community. Within this document, we will try to plainly explain what stigma is, why stigma is dangerous, and what stigma has to do with liver disease. We will also share some quick facts about two liver diseases that are very commonly stigmatized — non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and hepatitis C.

This is just an introductory educational resource. If you have any additional questions about the information found within, or about anything related to your liver health, please visit [liver.ca](https://liver.ca) or call the National Help Line.

The National HelpLine is here so that you and your loved ones have somewhere to turn for answers after diagnosis. The HelpLine is here to help you understand your disease and will provide you with the resources you need. You can call **1 (800) 563-5483** Monday to Friday from 9 AM to 5 PM ET or email [clf@liver.ca](mailto:clf@liver.ca) anytime.

## What does stigma have to do with my liver?

Essentially, “liver disease” is a complicated term because it can mean so many different things. In fact, there are more than 100 different liver diseases. Each is caused by a variety of factors, including viruses, toxins, genetics, alcohol, and unknown causes.

Some liver diseases that you may have heard of include hepatitis, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, cirrhosis, or liver cancer. Because there are so many different liver diseases, there is often a lot of confusion and misinformation. This misinformation can sometimes lead to incorrect assumptions, judgment, and fear — elements that create an environment where stigma thrives.

One way to define stigma is the act of shaming somebody and even treating them differently because of something like their health status. It is a form of negative stereotyping. And it hurts.

Some liver diseases are linked to things like drug use, alcohol use, or being overweight. And unfortunately, some people have negative views and stereotypes about each of these. Many people with a liver disease feel the impact of these stereotypes whether or not they drink, use drugs, or are overweight. Regardless, nobody deserves to be stigmatized or shamed.

## How do people feel stigma?

Below are things we hear sometimes from community members who are living with a liver disease.

“I always feel the need to tell people that I barely drink alcohol because people assume that’s how I ended up with a liver disease, and I don’t want to be judged.”

“I moved to Canada a few years ago. In my home country, I was ostracized by some of my family and even fired from a job when I told people I had hepatitis C, so I have learned to keep it to myself. Even here in Canada, it doesn’t always feel safe to share that information with people.”

“I have used intravenous drugs in my lifetime, and I know that makes some people uncomfortable. Even doctors and nurses treat me differently, so I never want to visit the clinic.”

“I have non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, a disease often linked to being overweight. I know some people think it’s my fault for being overweight and that I almost deserve this diagnosis. The shame feels terrible.”

## Why do we need to stop stigma?

Nothing positive comes from stigma. It makes it harder for some people to disclose their diagnosis. It can be a barrier to accessing treatment, prevention, and support. It can make people feel isolated and ashamed. It makes some people who are already facing systemic inequities face them even more. Together, we can build healthier communities by spreading education and standing up to stigma.

## Facts about non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and hepatitis C

### NAFLD

- Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is the most common liver disease in Canada, affecting more than 7 million people.
- Fat in the liver typically develops when a person consumes more fat and sugars than their body can handle.
- This is more common in people who are overweight or obese but can also occur in adults with healthy body weights.
- If fat builds up to more than 5% of the liver, then the liver is considered to be a fatty liver.
- NAFLD usually causes few symptoms, if any, and most people only find out that they have it when they undergo blood tests for other reasons.
- Although having this condition may not cause any immediate harm, there is a concern that extra fat in the liver might make the liver vulnerable to further injury such as inflammation and scarring.

### Hepatitis C

- One of the three most common forms of viral hepatitis is hepatitis C.
- An estimated 250,000 Canadians have hepatitis C, but many don't know it.
- Approximately 75% of people who are infected develop chronic infection while about 25% will clear their infection on their own.
- People with hepatitis C often have no symptoms. Many people live with hepatitis C for up to 20 or 30 years without feeling sick. When, or if, symptoms appear during the late stage of infection, they often reflect serious damage to the liver.
- Hepatitis C is a leading cause of cirrhosis, liver cancer, and liver transplants.
- You may risk exposure to hepatitis C by using injection drugs (even once), getting tattoos, piercings, pedicures, manicures or medical procedures with improperly sterilized equipment, sharing personal hygiene items with an infected person (e.g. razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers) or having had a blood transfusion or received blood products prior to July 1990.