

STARTING A SUPPORT GROUP

Create Your Own Support System

Support groups are an excellent way to bolster, educate and empower parents and caregivers who deal directly or indirectly with a family member with viral hepatitis.

Before starting any support group, the coordinator/organizer needs to ask a few simple questions. First, who are the potential members?

In the case of parents whose children have viral hepatitis, there could be a separate support group for children infected with viral hepatitis, their siblings, their parents or extended family members.

The “profile” or characteristics of each group will impact not only how the support group is organized, but what it should realistically be expected to deliver in terms of emotional support.

Teens with viral hepatitis may feel very comfortable with an online support group while their parents may get more accomplished through a traditional on-site program if potential group members live in the same area.

What each group delivers will also change. Parents may want medical input from a professional facilitator while middle school students may just want a peer group with whom to meet and talk. The group coordinator needs to determine the needs and select which model best meets each group's needs.

The group creator should take a hard look at his or her resources:

- Are there enough potential group members to pay a facilitator's fee?
- Is an appropriate meeting space available?
- Does the coordinator have the financial and/or computer skills to start an Internet support group?
- Does the organizer have the time and expertise to match potential support partners?

People touched by viral hepatitis have enough challenges to deal with without finding themselves caught in an unworkable or short-lived support system.

The meeting place should be in a public or semi-public place with, of course, privacy! It needs to be quiet and easy for all people, including those in wheelchairs, to reach.

It should have adequate lighting and ventilation, a comfortable temperature and comfortable seating. Avoid "theater seating" or rooms that are so big or small that the group dynamics are affected. The best physical format is a circle of chairs with nothing and nobody in the middle.

Can the Organizer Attract Group Members?

Once the support group organizer determines the membership and focus of the group and what the available resources are, advertising and outreach become very important.

The membership and goals of the group determine the way the organizer recruits and promotes the group. Considering that children with chronic viral hepatitis require frequent medical attention, publicizing the support group among doctors and other medical professionals is a good place to start.

Letters aimed at doctors and pediatricians will enable the local medical community to inform their hepatitis patients of the available support. Posters, flyers and brochures that can be placed in medical areas, such as waiting rooms, hospitals, immunization and health clinics, government health offices, pharmacies, etc., will reach people that either have or know others who have hepatitis.

For national support systems, pharmaceutical inserts are a possibility. Placing information on the Internet, thanks to search engines, is also an inexpensive and effective way to reach people who are online.

Press releases to newspapers, radio stations and television stations are helpful but they can't do the job alone. It takes a very targeted information approach to reach this unique audience.