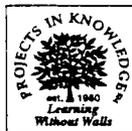

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HEPATITIS C

Information for patients
and their families



Education

Initiative in

Gastroenterology

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WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HEPATITIS C

What Is Hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a virus that can infect the liver. It is the most common type of viral hepatitis and the most significant cause of chronic liver disease in the United States as well as many other parts of the world. It is estimated that almost 4 million people in the United States have chronic hepatitis C.

Fortunately, the number of new cases of hepatitis C appears to be decreasing. However, because chronic hepatitis C is a long-term illness that may take many years to show symptoms, it is expected that the approximately 4 million people who are infected in the United States will have a great impact on the health care system, since many new cases of other liver disease can be expected to develop in these patients. It is estimated that hepatitis C is responsible for 8,000 deaths a year, but this number can be expected to triple over the next 10 to 20 years unless those infected receive effective treatment. Although work is under way to develop vaccines against the hepatitis C virus, no vaccine is now available.

How Is Hepatitis C Transmitted?

Hepatitis C is most commonly transmitted by blood containing the hepatitis C virus. The various means of transmission are described below.

Intravenous Drug Use

The most common way that hepatitis C is spread is by intravenous drug users who share needles. This method of transmission is responsible for half of all new infections. Note that hepatitis C can also be transmitted by noninjectable drug use and is becoming increasingly common among cocaine users who share the straws they use to snort the drug.

Transfusions of Blood Products

Individuals who received transfusions of blood products before 1990 had a risk of becoming infected with hepatitis C. However, since tests for hepatitis C were developed and introduced in blood bank screening in 1990, the risk of contracting hepatitis C through a blood transfusion has become very small, and transfusions are one of the least common sources of infection.

Sexual Transmission

Hepatitis C can also be transmitted through sexual contact. The risk of acquiring hepatitis C in a monogamous sexual relationship is low (considerably less than 5%). However, the risk increases if someone has multiple sexual partners. It is more likely for a man to transmit hepatitis C to a woman. Using condoms and practicing safe sex can help reduce this risk.

Transmission from Mother to Baby

Although it is not very common (risk less than 5%), hepatitis C can be transmitted from mothers to their newborn babies. Women who are pregnant and are hepatitis C-positive should consult their physicians about treatments that may help lessen the risk of transmission.

Other Methods of Transmission

Although it is not very common, hepatitis C can also be transmitted by body or ear piercing, manicures, tattoos, or acupuncture, usually because instruments are not properly sterilized.

Sharing of Household Implements

If someone in a household has hepatitis C, it is possible for the virus to be spread by sharing razors, toothbrushes, and other implements that may possibly

transmit blood. Members of the household should take reasonable precautions to avoid sharing such implements.

In many cases, it is not known how hepatitis C was transmitted.

What Kinds of Illness Does Hepatitis C Cause?

Hepatitis C begins as an acute infection, which people may not even realize they have. Unfortunately, the hepatitis C virus is difficult for the body's immune system to eliminate, and as many as 85% of those who are infected with the virus go on to have a chronic infection that may continue for many years. Most people who have chronic hepatitis C do not have bad consequences; however, 20% to 30% do go on to have cirrhosis of the liver within 20 years. The progression of the illness is usually very slow and insidious, and the infected person may not realize that he or she has hepatitis C for many years, until signs of liver problems develop, such as elevated liver enzyme values. The cirrhosis caused by hepatitis C can lead to hepatocellular carcinoma (liver cancer), which is responsible for many liver transplants.

How Is Hepatitis C Diagnosed?

Individuals often discover that they may have hepatitis C when they give blood. The screening tests that are used by blood banks are designed to weed out anyone who might have the infection; however, there may be false-positives. For this reason, persons who test positive on screening are referred to their physicians for further evaluation and testing to confirm or disprove the blood bank's findings.

Another sign that may cause physicians to test for hepatitis C is an elevation in liver enzyme levels (especially serum aminotransferase or ALT). There are other problems that may cause elevated ALT levels and the physician will determine what tests are needed to find out the cause.

If your physician suspects that you may have hepatitis C, he or she will want to find out about any risk factors you may have (for example, having had a blood transfusion before 1990; having ever used intravenous drugs, even many years previously; having had multiple sexual partners).

There are a number of different kinds of tests your physician can order to determine if you have hepatitis C. These include enzyme immunoassays (EIA tests) and recombinant immunoblot assays (RIBA) to determine if you have antibodies to hepatitis C in your body. Virologic tests are used to find out if you currently have hepatitis C virus. The results of your laboratory tests and your medical history will help the doctor decide which test is most appropriate for you. In some cases, the doctor may want to do a liver biopsy to see if there is inflammation or damage to the tissue of the liver that might suggest you are at risk of developing cirrhosis.

What Can You Do To Help If You Have Hepatitis C?

If you have chronic hepatitis C, one of the best things you can do to reduce the chance that you will have liver disease is to avoid drinking alcohol. Even moderate use of alcohol can increase the risk of cirrhosis by three or four times. Heavy use can increase the chance of cirrhosis by ten times. Maintaining good general health habits is also important since this helps your immune system function properly.

Patients and their families often feel frightened and alone when they are told of the diagnosis of hepatitis C. It can be very helpful to join a support group where you will have the chance to meet and talk with others who are coping with the same feelings and problems. Learning more about the illness and its treatment can help you feel more in control and help you understand the treatments your physician may suggest. Sources of information and support group referrals are listed at the end of this material.

How Is Hepatitis C Treated?

There is an effective treatment for hepatitis C called interferon, which is an antiviral medication. Interferon is given as an injection under the skin. Your physician will advise you whether your illness should be treated with interferon or not. He or she may be more likely to suggest treatment for patients who show signs of liver inflammation or damage on a liver biopsy. If your physician decides to prescribe interferon treatment for you, he or she will help you learn how to give yourself the injections. Interferon is effective in eliminating the hepatitis C virus in

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT HEPATITIS C

about 20% to 25% of cases. Patients are usually treated for 6 months to 1 year. If you have not responded well to interferon after about 3 months of treatment, your physician may decide to stop treatment, change doses, or consider having you enroll in a clinical trial of experimental treatment with a combination of interferon and a new agent that is still being tested called ribavirin. There are other experimental treatments that are also being studied. It is hoped that there will be a broader range of effective treatments for hepatitis C in the near future.

Patient Resources

The following organizations and sources can provide information about hepatitis C and referrals to support groups. Many of them can also provide assistance and support to individuals who are trying to establish new support groups.

Hepatitis Education Project

PO Box 95162, Seattle, WA 98145-2162
1-800-218-6932

Referrals to support groups, especially in the Pacific Northwest. Publishes a newsletter.

www.scn.org/health/hepatitis/hcp@scn.org
E-mail: hep@scn.org

Hepatitis Foundation International

30 Sunrise Terrace, Cedar Grove, NJ 07009
1-800-891-0707

Call for special packet on support group formation.

The HEP C Connection

1741 Gaylord Street, Denver CO 80206
1-800-522-4372

Offers referrals to local support groups; support to those establishing support groups; produces a bi-monthly newsletter.

Hepatitis Help Line

1-800-390-1202

A new hotline program just launched by the HEP C Connection to provide information and support to

those who have been notified that they have been rejected by blood banks because of hepatitis B or C. More than 3,500 physicians have volunteered to participate.

Hepatitis C Foundation

1502 Russett Drive, Warminster, PA 18974

(215) 672-2606; Fax: (215) 672-1518

<http://www.hepcfoundation.org>

E-mail: HEPATITIS_C_FOUNDATION@msn.com

American Liver Foundation

1425 Pompton Ave. Cedar Grove, NJ 07009

1-800-223-0179

<http://www.liverfoundation.org>

E-mail: info@liverfoundation.org

HEPV-L: Hepatitis C E-mail List

To get on this list, send e-mail to:

Listserv@sjuvn.stjohns.edu

With the message subscribe HEPV-L <your name>

This is a very lively e-mail list (over 100 messages per day).

Texas Liver Coalition

1 Riverway Suite 2460, Houston, TX 77056

(713) 626-4959, 1-800-72-LIVER

Creating a statewide network of support groups in Texas and surrounding areas.

The Hepatitis Directory

Another website with many links:

<http://www.hepref.com/hepc.html>

Schering Corporation

Manufacturer of interferon.

Commitment to Care line (drug information):

1-800-521-7157

Provides patient information, information on reimbursement and drug resource programs.

We thank Austin Jones and Shari Koziol of the Texas Liver Coalition, Houston, Texas, for their help in preparing these resource materials.



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