Hepatitis C Basics

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) causes an infectious yet curable disease that attacks the liver and results in numerous symptoms.

May 1, 2015 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

What happens when someone is infected?
The first six months following exposure is the acute phase of hep C. Up to 25 percent of people naturally clear the virus during the acute phase and are no longer infected. However, most are left with chronic HCV infection.

If untreated, hep C may cause fibrosis (mild to moderate liver scarring), cirrhosis (serious liver scarring), liver cancer, liver failure and death. HCV is the main reason for liver transplants in the United States.

How prevalent is HCV?
HCV is the most common blood-borne virus in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates between 2.7 million and 3.9 million Americans have HCV. Most don't know they are infected.

How is HCV transmitted?
HCV is most easily spread through direct blood-to-blood contact. Common routes of HCV infection are:

- Sharing needles and other equipment used to inject drugs
- Blood transfusions and organ transplants that were performed before July 1992

Who is at risk for HCV?
HCV testing is recommended for:

- Everyone born between 1945 and 1965 (three out of four people with chronic HCV are baby boomers)
- People who have injected drugs, even once
- Those who received a blood transfusion or organ transplant before July 1992
- Children whose mothers were living with hepatitis C during pregnancy

- Anyone who is HIV positive
- People with evidence of liver disease, such as an abnormal liver test result
- Those on long-term kidney dialysis
- Anyone exposed to HCV through their occupation

Can HCV be prevented?
Although there is no HCV vaccine, there are ways to reduce your chances of getting HCV or giving it to someone if you already have it.

- If you inject drugs, seek help to quit. Regardless, don't share anything associated with drug use, including non-injection drug equipment such as straws or pipes. HCV can live on these surfaces.
- Don't share toothbrushes or razors.
- If you are considering a tattoo or body piercing, use a reputable, licensed professional who follows strict hygiene procedures.
- Although sexual transmission of HCV is rare, there is a slight risk for those who are HIV positive, and among men who have sex with men. Condoms reduce the risk of transmitting HCV.
- If you have hep C, be sure to cover cuts and wounds. If you get blood on a surface, clean up with a solution of one part bleach to 10 parts water.

How is HCV diagnosed?
HCV testing begins with a test for antibodies, which the immune system produces after exposure to the virus. If antibody results are negative after at least six months since the suspected exposure, then the person does not have hep C.

If the HCV-antibody test is positive, then a viral load or HCV RNA test is done. The presence of HCV RNA confirms hepatitis C infection.

What are the symptoms of HCV?
Many people with HCV have few or no symptoms. Initially, it may feel like you are "coming down with something." Common symptoms in the acute phase are fatigue, muscle and joint pain, nausea and loss of appetite. People with chronic HCV also report fatigue and muscle and joint pain, along with other vague symptoms.

If the damage from hepatitis C progresses to severe scarring of the liver or cirrhosis, it may cause fatigue, bruising, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, abdominal discomfort, cola-colored urine, gray-colored stools, jaundice (yellow skin and whites of the eyes), itchy skin, and fluid in the lower extremities (edema).

Some symptoms of advanced cirrhosis are a bloated belly from fluid accumulation (ascites), bleeding from blood vessels in the digestive tract (varices) and confusion (hepatic encephalopathy).

If I have HCV, how can I protect my liver?
Everything goes through the liver, whether via the mouth, skin or lungs. Avoid alcohol. If you smoke or use recreational drugs, consider getting help to quit. Keep your immunizations current. Minimize exposure to fumes and toxic substances. Only take dietary supplements and medications under professional supervision. Try to live the healthiest lifestyle you can. Regular exercise, sufficient sleep and a diet rich in plant-based, non-processed foods are good not just for the liver, but for the entire body.

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Alcohol, prescription and nonprescription drugs, autoimmune diseases, and fat accumulation in the liver can all cause hepatitis. Viruses are the main causes of the disease. Here is what you need to know about the common causes of viral hepatitis:

What about other types of hepatitis?
Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Alcohol, prescription and nonprescription drugs, autoimmune diseases, and fat accumulation in the liver can all cause hepatitis. Viruses are the main causes of the disease. Here is what you need to know about the common causes of viral hepatitis:

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