Care for Hepatitis C Patients Does Not Stop With Treatment

November 20, 2017 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

These days, pretty much everyone who is treated for hepatitis C is cured. Sadly, a few aren't, and we need to recognize this. Another thing we need to be aware of is that being cured from hepatitis C does not make us immune to other health problems. For instance, people with stage 3 or 4 fibrosis/cirrhosis are at risk for hepatic cellular carcinoma (HCC). HCC is an extremely serious form of liver cancer that frequently appears without symptoms, and its appearance often comes when it is too late to be treated. Death can occur quickly.

While cancer deaths are generally declining, HCC prevalence and death rates are rising. The Cancer Health website cites that, "More than 40,000 people a year are diagnosed with liver cancer in the United States, and the rate is rising. While cancer of the liver and bile ducts is the 13th most common type of cancer in the United States, it is the fifth leading cause of cancer death, according to the National Cancer Institute. Worldwide, it is the second leading cause of cancer death."

There is strong evidence showing that when hepatitis C is cured, HCC risk dramatically drops. There are so many large studies about it, I am not going to reference them here, but if you have any doubt, browse Hepatology's abstract supplement for just this year's research.

HOWEVER, the HCC risk is still there if you have cirrhosis or late stage fibrosis. Additionally, my November 6, 2017 blog presented research that shows that some people may have later stages of fibrosis than thought, and thus are at risk for liver cancer despite being treated. This risk increases with alcohol use, hepatitis B, and fatty liver disease.

Recent surveillance studies show that HCC is under diagnosed. This is one cancer that must be diagnosed early, because without this, the risk of death is high.

The other must, is that we must offer treatment to everyone. It's time to stop the insane practice of not providing hepatitis C treatment for people who have minimal liver damage or who use drugs. Now that we have safe and effective hepatitis C medications, it's time to put them to use at their full capacity.

If you have or had hepatitis C or any other risk factor for liver cancer, talk to your doctor. Don't be a liver cancer statistic.

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