Factors That May Increase Your Risk of Death From Hepatitis C

March 5, 2018 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

Barely a week goes by in which I don't read about the increased risk of death from hepatitis C. People living with this virus are at risk of dying prematurely from all the major causes of mortality, such as cancer, heart disease, and stroke. However, it appears that certain behaviors may hasten death when you have hepatitis C.

The January 2018 issue of Hepatology published a large study on this subject. (The Contribution of Health Risk Behaviors in American Adults With Chronic Hepatitis C by Hamish Innes, et al.) According to Innes and colleagues, people with chronic hepatitis C are 3.1 to 6.7 times more likely to die from all causes than the general population. A total of 29, 468 people participated in this study.

The causes of death range from liver-related ones to non-liver (extrahepatic) ones. Untreated hepatitis C increases the risk for heart disease, stroke, liver and kidney cancer, lymphoma, Parkinson's, and diabetes.

And then there are behavioral factors that increase mortality risk. The main ones are alcohol use, cigarette smoking, drug use, poor diet, and lack of physical activity. It is these factors that sparked the interest for this research.

Intuition suggests that if you drink, smoke, use drugs, eat poorly, and don't exercise, there is an increased risk of early death. However, is it worse or the same if you have hepatitis C? What if we compared these factors in people with the virus to the general population?

Here is where it got interesting. It's no surprise that this and other studies found that these behaviors are associated with risk of earlier mortality. But the major finding here is that the all-cause mortality risk for people living with hepatitis C may be due to alcohol use, cigarette smoking, drug use, poor diet, and lack of physical activity. In fact, at least half of the premature deaths may be due to behavioral factors rather than from hep C. Simply put, people with hepatitis C have a high use of behavioral risk factors that contribute to excess mortality.

And if this is true, then people who drink, smoke, use drugs, eat poorly, and don't exercise, may still be at risk of excess mortality even if their hepatitis C is cured. Perhaps this part isn't surprising. We all know what we "should be doing" regarding certain behaviors. However, it is

worth stressing that health is an entire package. The word “health” means wholeness. We can forget this when we just focus on hep C.

No lectures here. I know we all try our best. But if you have hepatitis C and you drink, smoke, use drugs, eat poorly, and don’t exercise, are you willing to change at least one of those things? Perhaps you can make one small change, just for today. And then repeat.

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