Hepatitis C and the Risk of Non-alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease

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Hepatitis C is a liver infection caused by the Hepatitis C virus. Hep C (HCV) is a blood-borne virus that attacks the liver causing inflammation with risk of becoming chronic, damaging liver tissue and interfering with liver function.

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is a liver condition affecting people who drink little to no alcohol but have too much fat stored in the liver. NAFLD is the most common form of chronic liver disease in the U.S. affecting an estimated 80 to 100 million people.

According to the Mayo Clinic, “Nonalcoholic fatty liver disease occurs in every age group but especially in people in their 40’s and 50’s who are at high risk of heart disease because of risk factors like obesity and type 2 diabetes. The condition is also closely linked to metabolic syndrome, which is a cluster of abnormalities including increased abdominal fat, poor ability to use the hormone insulin, high blood pressure and high blood levels of triglycerides, a type of fat.”

For patients with fatty liver disease there is a danger of developing inflammation which can lead to liver damage such as fibrosis or permanent scarring like cirrhosis. Fat in the liver region is called visceral fat. This can impair damaged liver tissue from regenerating. NAFLD is the third most common risk factor for liver cancer.

For Hepatitis C patients who have NAFLD, this makes fighting Hep C even harder. Not only does the virus need to be eliminated in order to stop further damage from occurring but the increased fat build up in the liver interferes with the liver being able to remove toxins from the blood. These fat deposits also need to be reduced and eliminated from causing damage and help healthy liver tissue to regenerate.

The good news is that majority of risk factors with NAFLD can be taken care of by the patient, which in turn helps the liver. Reducing a fatty liver reduces the stress put on the liver.

In other words, make your liver cells as strong as they can be in order to fight the Hepatitis C virus. Chronic Hepatitis C can lead to fibrosis and cirrhosis. With Hepatitis C treatment today there is a 95-99% chance for a cure.

Even if you have had Hepatitis C treatment and cured, if you have NAFLD you can still be at danger of damage to your liver.

Helping your liver by choosing a healthy lifestyle can help you live longer with reduced factors to other diseases like high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease or diabetes.

Risk Factors for Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) are:

- Being overweight, particularly when fat is stored in the abdomen
- High blood pressure
- High blood fat levels, either triglycerides or LDL (“bad”) cholesterol
- Type 2 Diabetes or Prediabetes
- Metabolic syndrome
- Polycystic ovary syndrome
- Sleep apnea
- Underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism)
- Underactive pituitary gland (hypopituitarism)

Treatment to help control or reduce fat buildup in your liver:

- Losing weight
- Exercise
- Lowering your cholesterol and triglycerides
- Controlling your diabetes
- Avoiding alcohol

Stay tuned next week as we discuss more about Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and what you can do to help your liver.

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